The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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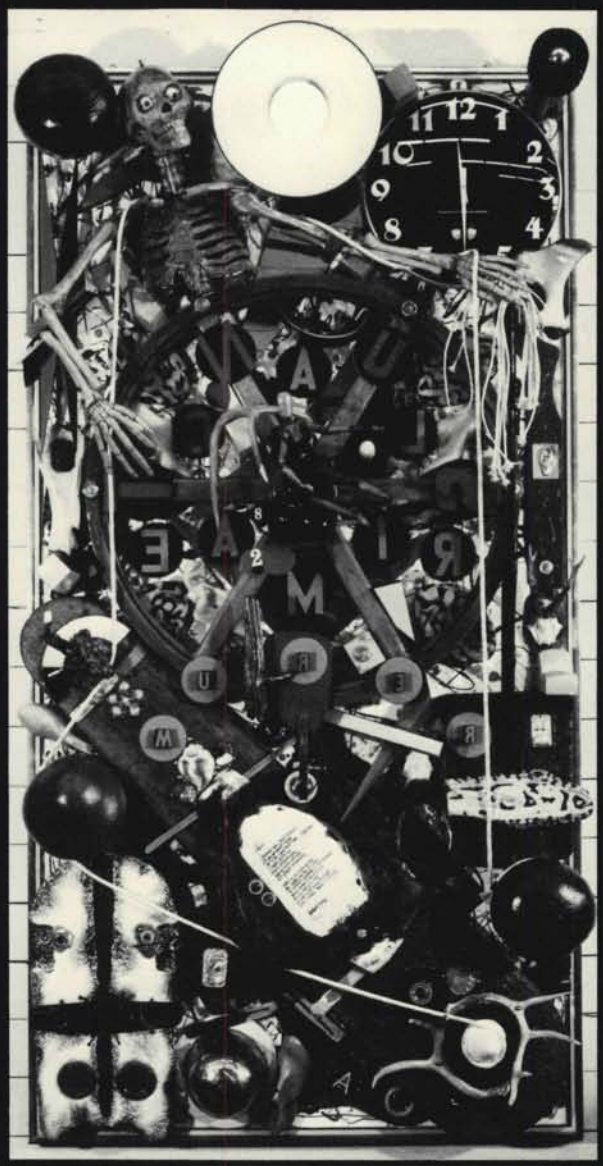

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The life and death of Lillian Hellman

by Hilton Kramer

I am not interested in the degree to which she told the literal truth.
—Marsha Norman, in *The New York Times* (August 26, 1984)

I never took Lillian's politics very seriously . . .
—Robert Brustein, in *The New Republic* (August 13/20, 1984)

Of the many remarkable things to be noted about the life of Lillian Hellman, who died on June 30, none was more remarkable than the quality of the sentiment that greeted its end. Even as the obligatory eulogies were delivered, they seemed to contain an unmistakable note of embarrassment—a grudging awareness that at the time of her death the reputation of Lillian Hellman was well on its way to becoming a shambles. Only in Robert Brustein's bizarre tribute in *The New Republic,* however, was this note given explicit expression.

> Previously characterized by enemies as a fellow traveler who continued to embrace Stalinism long after most other American intellectuals had abandoned it [Brustein wrote], Lillian was now being called a liar and a bully. Herself a victim of blacklisting, she was now thought to be engaged in muffling the free expression of others, leading some to say that she embraced the First Amendment only in her own defense. It was a miserable epilogue to what should have been a respected old age.[1]

Yet even Brustein found something to admire in what he called "her anger," which in the end, as he described it, "became a free-floating, cloud-swollen tempest that rained on friend and foe alike." It did not rain on friend and foe with the same consequences, of course. As *The New York Times* reported on August 27, "Miss Hellman's $2.25 million suit [against Mary McCarthy] cost Miss McCarthy $26,000 in legal fees."[2] Lest that picturesque reference to a "cloud-swollen tempest" mislead us into imagining the aged Lillian Hellman as a kind of liberal King Lear—possessed, as John Hersey quaintly put it, by "a rage of the mind against all kinds of injustice"—it is worth remembering that she was fiercely determined, in typical Stalinist fashion, to silence her critics and, if possible, to bring about their ruin. Her end was certainly "miserable," as Robert Brustein said, but it was no "epilogue": it was perfectly consistent with the attitudes and activities of a lifetime. Even *The New York Times,* which generally shies away from such esoteric matters, acknowledged that Lillian Hellman's lawsuit against Mary McCarthy "revived the split between American Stalinists and anti-Stalinists of the 1930's." Yet "revived" was not quite the word that was wanted in that sentence;

1 "Epilogue to Anger," *The New Republic,* August 13/20, 1984.

2 "McCarthy Is Recipient Of MacDowell Medal," *The New York Times,* August 27, 1984.

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"reflected" or "continued" would have been more accurate. For in the mind of Lillian Hellman, it was a split that was never forgotten or forgiven, and she took her revenge upon her anti-Stalinist adversaries as soon as she felt rich enough and powerful enough to do so.

No one knows this better than Robert Brustein, who less than ten years ago dedicated one of his books, *The Culture Watch: Essays on Theatre and Society, 1969-1974,* to the late Lionel Trilling—the same Lionel Trilling who was so egregiously maligned in the pages of Lillian Hellman's *Scoundrel Time.* Yet in nothing that Brustein wrote on the occasion of Lillian Hellman's death was there a word said in defense of either Mary McCarthy or Lionel Trilling. It would no doubt have been considered bad taste to invoke "the split between American Stalinists and anti-Stalinists of the 1930's," yet Brustein managed, all the same, to make a veiled reference to it when he spoke sarcastically of "American intellectuals still waging fifty-year-old wars"—a reference that had the effect of mocking the victims of Hellman's malevolent words and actions while appearing to remain "above" such pettifogging interests. In any case, when it came to "waging fifty-year-old wars," Lillian Hellman was herself a veritable field marshal with plenty of loyal troops at her command.

It was to be expected, of course, that she would be praised at the time of her death. The etiquette of the occasion called for panegyric, and there was no shortage of admirers to provide it in ample measure. She had a great many friends in positions of power, influence, and high reputation. She had many political allies who supported her various vendettas. And she had something else, too—the kind of money and position that enabled her to bestow (and withhold) rewards. For a good many years, moreover, it had been an established practice in the literary world for writers to lavish her work with the most extravagant encomiums; and her personal political history—notwithstanding the fact that she was the very model of the American literary Stalinist—had likewise won her a special status as, of all things, a moral heroine. The chorus of acclaim that had become an expected accompaniment to every new turn in Hellman's career had reached its fulsome climax in 1976 with the publication of *Scoundrel Time*—the third volume in the trilogy of her so-called "memoirs," and one of the most poisonous and dishonest testaments ever written by an American author.

It tells us a good deal about the temper of the times that this malicious and mendacious book, written to even old scores with her anti-Stalinist "friends," was widely hailed on its publication as a work of awesome moral probity. Reviewing it on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review,* Maureen Howard was moved to invoke the shades of Emerson and Thoreau as appropriate points of comparison, and ended her catalogue of praise with a reference to Camus—a writer whose entire career as an artist and a moralist represented a complete repudiation of everything Lillian Hellman stood for. Oh, how her friends rallied round that detestable book! John Hersey spoke of Hellman as "a moral force, almost an institution of conscience" in the pages of *The New Republic*—the same *New Republic,* incidentally, whose editor had just rejected a less favorable account of *Scoundrel Time* written by Alfred Kazin. And when Diana Trilling sought to set the record straight by answering the charges made against her and Lionel Trilling in *Scoundrel Time,* her publisher—who was also Hellman's publisher—promptly refused to publish what she had written on this subject, an act that elicited not the slightest word of protest from this "institution of conscience."

Yet it was undoubtedly with *Scoundrel Time* that Lillian Hellman, flushed with money, spite, overconfidence, and the incipient paranoia which dominated her later years, began to overplay her hand. Memories might be short and a sense of moral discrimination nonexistent in the well-heeled literary and theatrical society that had made

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her its heroine, but elsewhere history—and Lillian Hellman's role in it—had not been entirely forgotten. Writers who had reason to remember what the blight of Stalinism had once visited upon American political and cultural life began to speak up—not only Diana Trilling, but Murray Kempton in *The New York Review of Books,* William Phillips in *Partisan Review,* and Irving Howe in *Dissent,* among others. One focus of Hellman's attack in *Scoundrel Time* had been the anti-Communist Left and the liberals allied with it, and she specifically maligned the editors and writers of *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* for their alleged failure to come to the defense of those who were questioned about their Communist Party activities by Senator McCarthy's committee and other committees of the United States Congress in the late Forties and Fifties. She explained their alleged delinquency in the following manner:

> Perhaps that, in part, was the penalty of nineteenth-century immigration. The children of timid immigrants are often remarkable people: energetic, intelligent, hardworking; and often they make it so good that they are determined to keep it at any cost.[3]

Her explanation, in other words, was the customary Stalinist charge of sellout, only in this case embellished with a touch of snobbery that was distinctly her own.

In his response to this charge, William Phillips wrote:

> Lillian Hellman's question as to why we did not come to the defense of those who had been attacked by McCarthy is not as simple as it appears. First of all, some were Communists and what one was asked to defend was their right to lie about it. My own code was to tell the truth about myself, regardless of the consequences. Another consideration was the feeling, which I am sure was shared by others, that Communists did not have a divine right to a job in the government or in Hollywood—any more than I felt I had a right to a high-salaried job in an institution I believed to be an instrument of capitalist power and exploitation . . . . Frankly, too, I could not take seriously those Communists and fellow-traveling celebrities who were playing with revolution, for it did not seem to occur to them that being for a revolution might have consequences. Furthermore, it was not just a case of disagreeing with the Communists. They had branded us as the enemy. They were under orders not to speak to us. Their press called us every dirty name in and out of the political lexicon. And, of course, they were the apologists for the arrest and torture of countless dissident writers in the Soviet Union and in other Communist countries . . . . [H]ow could Lillian Hellman not know these things? And just as she asks how we could not come to the defense of McCarthy's victims, one could ask her how she could not come to the defense of all those who had been killed or defamed by the Communists? How could she still be silent about the persecution of writers in Russia?[4]

She had clearly gone too far and claimed too much. Writing in the aftermath of the Vietnam war and the Watergate scandal, she no doubt felt she could get away with anything—even Garry Wills's wholesale misrepresentation of the history of the Cold War that served as the introduction to *Scoundrel Time.* (It was in that introduction, by the way, that Mary McCarthy was first cited as an enemy because of her public role in opposing the Communist-controlled Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace, which was staged at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York in 1949 and which Lillian Hellman served as a prominent sponsor and spokesman.) Yet favorable as the Zeitgeist was to the lies and accusations propounded in the pages of *Scoundrel Time* and its introduction, American intellectual life had not, after all, become so lost to the corruptions of revisionist history that there were not some writ-

3 *Scoundrel Time* (Little, Brown and Company, 1976), pages 40-41.

4 William Phillips, "What Happened in the Fifties," *Partisan Review,* 1976 (Number 3).

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ers left to remind us of the truth, and they now began to mount their counterattack—not only in their own defense, but in defense of veracity itself.[5] In the critical responses of William Phillips, Diana Trilling, et al., to the fabrications and allegations of *Scoundrel Time,* we saw the first round in what was to become, by 1984, a sweeping exposé of the falsehoods that formed the very fabric of Hellman's autobiographical writings—those writings that brought her, as Robert Brustein correctly noted, "renewed fame, wealth, and the respect of the literary community, besides making her a model for independent women everywhere."

It would be tedious as well as unnecessary to rehearse all the voluminous detail that is now on public record to show how often and how profoundly Lillian Hellman misrepresented, distorted, and ignored the truth in writing the autobiographical trilogy that consists of *An Unfinished Woman* (1969), *Pentimento: A Book of Portraits* (1973), and *Scoundrel Time* (1976). The key documents in the case are Martha Gellhorn's "Guerre de Plume" (*The Paris Review,* Spring 1981), Dr. Muriel Gardiner's memoirs, *Code Name: Mary* (Yale University Press, 1983) and Samuel McCracken's "'Julia' and Other Fictions" (*Commentary,* June 1984). Martha Gellhorn's piece is particularly hilarious and devastating in showing how virtually every word written by Hellman about her adventures in and on behalf of the Spanish Civil War and about her acquaintance with Ernest Hemingway—Gellhorn was married to Hemingway at the time—was sheer invention. Dr. Gardiner's *Code Name: Mary* is an account of her own work in the anti-fascist underground in the Thirties—the work that Hellman not only fictionalized and embellished in her famous "memoir" of "Julia," but in the story of which she falsely claimed to have played a role herself. Devastating, too, is Samuel McCracken's documentary research into the specific circumstantial detail on which the veracity of "Julia" must finally be judged. To say that Lillian Hellman emerges from this literature as a false and self-serving witness would be an understatement. She stands exposed as a shameless liar, and Mary McCarthy was only stating the truth when she said, in her famous charge on the Dick Cavett Show, that "Every word she writes is a lie."

One final detail about *Scoundrel Time* deserves mention, however, for the light it casts on the way this "institution of conscience" manipulated the "facts" (as she never tired of calling her fictions) in the service of political falsehood. In *Scoundrel Time,* in an episode replete with disingenuous solicitude for the "friend" she was determined to discredit—namely, Lionel Trilling—Lillian Hellman gave us a wonderful example of what can only be called her "method" in dealing with the truth. Reading the introduction that Trilling had written in 1975 for a new edition of his novel, *The Middle of the Journey,* and finding that he continued to stand by his judgment that Whittaker Chambers, upon whom the character of Gifford Maxim in the novel was based, was "a man of honor," Hellman roused herself to set her readers straight about Chambers and the Hiss case. This is the way Allen Weinstein described her performance in his book, *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case*:

> Sections of *Scoundrel Time* took up the argument for Hiss's innocence and his frame-up, with Hellman observing that "Facts are facts . . . and there had never been a chance that, as Trilling continues to claim . . . Chambers was a man of honor." Hellman offered three major sets of "facts" to support her belief in Alger Hiss's innocence: that Chambers hid his microfilms in a pumpkin for a long period of time (every news account in 1948 and all subsequent books on the Case pointed out that Chambers placed the films in the pumpkin the morning of the day he turned them over to HUAC); that "most of the frames of the five rolls of microfilm were unreadable"

5 My own contribution to the discussion was an article called "The Blacklist and the Cold War," which appeared in *The New York Times* on October 3, 1976.

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(also well publicized was the fact that only one roll was illegible, while the two strips of State Department documents were perfectly "readable"); and that the "pumpkin papers"—finally released to Hiss and other researchers in 1973—were found "to contain nothing secret, nothing confidential" (which applied only to the non-State Department rolls). Hellman's insistence that she "wasn't a historian" was thus amply vindicated.[6]

This is the writer about whom Robert Brustein could write in his obituary tribute, "I never took Lillian's politics very seriously," and in praise of whom Marsha Norman was given space in *The New York Times* to declare: "I am not interested in the degree to which she told the literal truth."[7]

Yet if we are not to take "Lillian's politics very seriously," and if we are not to put much stock in her capacity to tell "the literal truth" about anything, the question that inevitably arises is: on what basis *are* we being invited to admire either the woman or her work? Her claim to being considered an "institution of conscience" was bogus, for it was based on her political activities and these were wholly devoted to Communist causes in a period when Communism had shown itself to be a system of murder and terror.[8] The "memoirs" that brought her wealth, fame, and honors of every sort are now shown to have been a fraud. Is it, then, on the basis of her superior contribution to the art of the drama that we are being asked to admire Lillian Hellman? Not at all. Even her friends were too embarrassed to make much of a claim for her on that score. Robert Brustein acknowledged that none of her plays is "of the first rank," and while he went on to suggest that three of them—*Toys in the Attic, The Autumn Garden,* and *The Little Foxes*—would "have a permanent place in American drama" (itself a highly equivocal compliment considering the quality of American drama), he concluded by observing that "it may be that her life, with its strong alliances, combative courage, and abrupt domestic scenes, will eventually be considered her greatest theater." Marsha Norman, the playwright whose *'night, Mother* won her the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1983, likewise had little to say for Lillian Hellman's plays in the lengthy *hommage* she published in *The New York Times.* "It was her other writing that called me, her life that moved me," Miss Norman wrote. "Her own story was the most compelling one she wrote, she was her own most significant character." Which in a way, of course, is true—but not in the way that Marsha Norman meant it. For what we are being asked to admire, finally, is that fictional character which Lillian Hellman so adroitly created in her "memoirs" and which she performed so consummately in the "theater" that she had made of her life. What we are being asked to admire, in other words, is a carefully constructed illusion.

It is an illusion, however, that can be sustained only if we ignore the facts of her real life and the beliefs that governed it. We were given an interesting glimpse into the latter when *The New York Times* reported the terms of her will on July 20.[9] Lillian Hellman left an estate "valued at about $3.5 million," according to the *Times,* and her will stipulated that half of her residuary estate was to go to the "creation of the Dashiell Hammett Fund." The *Times* story went on to report:

> The fund, according to the will, will make grants "for the promotion and advancement of political, social and economic equality, civil rights and civil liberties."

6 Allen Weinstein, *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), pages 551-552.

7 Marsha Norman, "Lillian Hellman's Gift To a Young Playwright," *The New York Times,* August 26, 1984.

8 The best single account of Lillian Hellman's political history is to be found in Sidney Hook's essay, "The Scoundrel in the Looking Glass," in his book, *Philosophy and Public Policy* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1980).

9 "Hellman Estate to Aid Friend and Trust Funds," *The New York Times,* July 20, 1984.

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Miss Hellman asked in the will that the trustees of the fund "be guided by the political, social and economic beliefs—which, of course, were radical—of the late Dashiell Hammett, who was a believer in the doctrines of Karl Marx." Miss Hellman lived off and on with Mr. Hammett for 31 years.

Robert Brustein may not have taken Lillian Hellman's politics very seriously, but Lillian Hellman did and so must we. In bequeathing so large a portion of her wealth to a fund honoring the *beliefs* of yet another unrepentent Stalinist, Lillian Hellman wrote her own truest epitaph.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

The letters of Henry James *by Joseph Epstein*
Max Beckmann: the later work *by Dan Hofstadter*
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Censoring *20th-Century Culture:* the case of Noam Chomsky

by Geoffrey Sampson

Publishing in the Western world is an enterprise whose success depends on freedom of expression enjoyed in Western countries. Reputable publishers know this, and do not lightly accept restraints on that freedom. Eminent historians have a duty to their subject; they do not readily collaborate with attempts to conceal historical truth, particularly when the truth in question relates to episodes having the gravest possible implications for current political life. These points are axiomatic.

Or so I supposed until very recently. In the last few months I have had an experience which calls them into question. The experience has staggered me. It may be that I am naïve, and that such incidents are commonplace; but I do not think so. The reader must judge for himself.

In January, 1982, I was asked to contribute an entry to a dictionary of twentieth-century thinkers which was to be published in Britain by Fontana/Collins under the title *Biographical Companion to Modern Thought,* and in America by Harper & Row as *Twentieth-Century Culture.* The book promised to be a respectable, indeed distinguished, publication. It was edited by Alan Bullock (Lord Bullock), one of the most eminent figures in the British academic world: author of the standard biography of Adolf Hitler, Founding Master of St. Catherine's College, Oxford, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford from 1969 to 1973, chairman of a galaxy of committees concerned with educational issues, and loaded with honors among which a Life Barony and a Fellowship of the British Academy are only two of the most prestigious. (According to the contract I signed, Lord Bullock was the editor of the book and R. B. Woodings, who handled day-to-day dealings with contributors, was his assistant; the eventual title page listed Woodings as co-editor.)

My assigned subject was Noam Chomsky, a complex man who has made his mark in several different areas of life: as a professor of linguistics, who virtually single-handedly turned that subject into a major focus of attention for philosophers and psychologists, and as a political activist, who came to wide public attention during the Vietnam War as perhaps the foremost figure in the movement of radical opposition to American actions in Southeast Asia, and who more generally propounded (and continues to propound) an anarcho-syndicalist version of socialist theory. My qualifications for writing about Chomsky, briefly, were that I too am a professional linguist with radical political interests; in 1979 I published a book analyzing the links between Chomsky's linguistic and political ideas.

I sketched Chomsky's many-faceted career as accurately as I could within the roughly five hundred fifty words allotted. The bulk of my essay was either laudatory or evaluatively neutral. In one short passage dealing with Chomsky's recent activities,

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however, I could not avoid a negative tone. Chomsky has slipped somewhat from public view in the ten years since American withdrawal from Vietnam; yet those years have seen him engaged in what are possibly the most remarkable and controversial actions of his career to date. Both of them relate to episodes of genocide: in Indochina, and under Nazism. I alluded to these actions in the following words, which amounted to about one twelfth of the whole essay:

> he forfeited authority as a political commentator by a series of actions widely regarded as ill-judged (repeated polemics minimizing the Khmer Rouge atrocities in Cambodia; endorsement of a book—which Chomsky admitted he had not read—that denied the historical reality of the Jewish Holocaust).

I sent my essay in to Lord Bullock's assistant Mr. Woodings; he expressed warm approval of it; the book appeared, in Britain, about a year later; and that, I assumed, was that.

That was not that. This spring, shortly before the American edition of the book was due to appear, Lord Bullock's assistant got in touch again. To cut a long story short, Chomsky had complained to Fontana/Collins about the inclusion in my essay of the words just quoted and had threatened Harper & Row with a libel action if these words appeared in their paperback edition of the book. (He was apparently too late to catch the small American hardback edition.) I pointed out that what I had written was no more than the truth, that publishers of a serious reference book of this kind had a duty to give an all-round assessment of its subjects rather than letting the subjects censor their own entries, and that an essay on Chomsky's career which went into detail on his theories of mathematical linguistics while remaining silent on these more controversial topics would imply a degraded scale of moral values. But all to no avail. Harper & Row insisted that the libel threat must be taken seriously, and, when I would not allow my own name to stand under a mutilated version of my text, Lord Bullock and Mr. Woodings announced that they would replace what I had written (in the American and any future British reprinting of the book) with an entry of their own. I have read the Bullock/Woodings version of Chomsky's career; it skates over Chomsky's recent political activities with an anodyne remark that he has "continued to be involved in controversy" on (unnamed) issues.

Thus American users of what promises to be a standard work of reference are deprived of information about one of the most significant facets of the public activities of one of its more important subjects, on the sole ground that the subject himself objects to this aspect of his career being recorded. This, surely, is an extraordinary state of affairs.

The episode raises two questions in my mind. In what way does Chomsky believe that my words misrepresented his actions (since, to threaten a libel suit, he must surely claim that what I wrote is somehow false)? And, even if Chomsky does believe that I deviated from the truth, how in terms of his own stated principles can he justify the use of a legal threat to suppress my freedom of expression? Let me first consider the issue of my accuracy.

My statement that Chomsky has "forfeited authority as a political commentator," in the first place, is an assertion about other people's recent views of Chomsky, and the strong terms used by many commentators make the phrase "forfeited authority" a restrained one. To Ian Robinson, the British literary scholar, Chomsky is "plainly too crazed to be taken seriously." Martin Peretz, the editor of *The New Republic,* calls him simply "a fool." Fred Halliday, a leftist political writer, uses the term "pariah," and quotes the editor of "a liberal U.S. journal" as saying "There is no way we could publish Chomsky now." Presumably, in face of a chorus of published remarks like these, I was not expected to tell Harper & Row's readers that Chomsky was currently at the zenith of his political influence.

But doubtless Chomsky's real objection

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was to the examples I mentioned in my parenthesis rather than to the general conclusion I drew from them. So let us look at the relevant facts. Both in the Cambodia and in the Holocaust cases it will be appropriate to begin by reminding the reader of the historical background.

In the years before Communist regimes took control in South Vietnam and Cambodia, it was an open question how well or badly they would treat their subjects if they did eventually gain power; widely different forecasts could reasonably be defended by various commentators. Noam Chomsky's opinion lay at the optimistic extreme of the spectrum. In 1973 he expressed his view of the North Vietnamese regime by quoting from a RAND study by Konrad Kellen called "1971 and Beyond: The View from Hanoi": "'The Hanoi regime is perhaps one of the most genuinely popular in the world today. The 20 million North Vietnamese . . . find the system just and the labor they do rewarding.'" Chomsky argued that the Viet Cong guerrillas were winning the war for South Vietnam because of "'the progressive social and economic results' shown by their programmes. As elsewhere in Indochina, it was the success of the Communist-led forces in gaining popular support through successful programmes that led to the American effort" (the internal quotation here is from William Nighswonger, at one time a senior official in the Agency for International Development in South Vietnam). Many people (myself included) opposed the Vietnam War because we believed that it was being fought in a supremely callous fashion and that the human misery caused by the war itself outweighed the misery likely to be caused by Communist rule. But for Chomsky this was not an appropriate motive for opposition to the war: "The principle that we should retract our claws when the victim bleeds too much is hardly an elevated one," he wrote in 1969. For Chomsky the American engagement in Indochina was wrong because it was not a matter of helping one side in a struggle between rival Indochinese factions: rather, it was a "war against the peoples of Asia," as he wrote in 1971. The South Vietnamese government was a mere "American puppet regime," whereas the Viet Cong were "dying for their country and defending it, with indescribable heroism." Chomsky wrote much more about Vietnam than about Cambodia, because the American engagement in Vietnam lasted much longer; but his preference for the cause of Communist insurgents as against that of non-Communist governments applied to Cambodia as much as to South Vietnam (cf. his words "As elsewhere in Indochina" just quoted).

After the Communists won, things turned out very differently from what these quotations suggest. What happened in South Vietnam was bad enough. Hundreds of thousands of people, including many who had been opponents of the U.S.-backed Thieu regime, were herded into barbaric prison camps where the conditions killed many, sent many others mad, and crippled others for life. Year after year, thousands of Vietnamese prefer to put to sea in tiny boats, often to be sexually brutalized and killed by pirates, or to die of drowning or thirst, rather than to remain in Communist Vietnam. Yet this pales by comparison with events in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975.

The entire population of Phnom Penh was forced to evacuate the city instantaneously and engage in long forced marches to resettle in empty countryside, without the equipment needed for home building or agriculture. This applied even to hospital patients: British medical personnel reported that surgical operations were interrupted at gunpoint by Khmer Rouge cadres demanding that patients leave the city immediately. François Ponchaud, a French priest who was an eyewitness, described how

> the strongest dragged pitifully along, others were carried by friends, and some were lying on beds pushed by their families with their plasma and drip bumping alongside. I shall never forget one cripple who had neither hands nor feet, writhing along the ground like a severed worm . . . .

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Any sign of dissidence was punished by death. One refugee reported that "some people tried to argue with the Khmers Rouges—a druggist in particular. The Khmers Rouges cut off his head before my eyes." Another refugee "saw the Khmers Rouges arrest about twenty young men with long hair; they shot them before our eyes." Army officers and civil servants were systematically rounded up and, in Khmer Rouge parlance, "sent to the Higher Organization" (killed). Near Phnom Penh (according to Ponchaud) "an entire company was massacred, with their wives. The children stood by crying as their parents were shot before their eyes. 'Why are you crying over enemies,' they were told; 'if you don't stop we'll kill you too.'"

Those who went to a quick death at the hands of the Higher Organization were a small minority; many times more met a slow death through starvation and overwork. Suon Phal, a student, described how "We didn't have any oxen so we formed a team of eight men to pull the plough. Several of my comrades, exhausted by this work, began spitting blood and died." According to Ponchaud, "The human organism was used to the extreme limit of its physical endurance, no effort was made to spare it and it was never given a day of rest." At the end of 1975, for unknown reasons, the Khmers Rouges relocated many Cambodians a second time. Ponchaud writes that "this second deportation was even more deadly than the first, for people's systems were weaker and could not take the journey . . . . [A doctor reported that] people were gaunt as skeletons, their legs full of abscesses. Another witness says that some people fell under the train on purpose and committed suicide. He speaks of two hundred and fifty such suicides near Mongkolborey. Yet another says, 'On the road to Phnom Srok there were tens of thousands of people from Phnom Penh, all gaunt and lifeless, marching in columns . . . . Some were laughing and dancing, shouting and eating raw rice, many had gone crazy from fatigue, privation and fear.'" At the end of 1975, estimates of the number of Cambodians killed by Khmer Rouge treatment in the nine months since the end of the war ranged from 800,000 to 1,400,000 (out of a total population of about seven million).

The English language lacks terms adequate to the dreadfulness of this historical episode. Yet it seems to have been perpetrated almost frivolously, if that word can be used without insulting the memory of the dead. The fortunes of war changed, and in August 1980, Khieu Samphan, the former Khmer Rouge prime minister, was himself a refugee from a Vietnamese invasion which had conquered most of Cambodia. In an interview with Western journalists he dismissed the ideology in whose name hundreds of thousands had been murdered, almost as if he were a businessman urging the public not to dwell on last year's unprofitable sales line: "Communism is dead. To reject communism once and for all is undoubtedly the best way of uniting all Kampucheans in the anti-Vietnamese crusade . . . . For them [Cambodians] communism is synonymous with misery . . . ."

Nobody suggests that Western commentators such as Noam Chomsky could have foreseen these horrors. The fact remains that all Chomsky's considerable political influence had been exerted in order to support the Communist cause and to undermine the forces which opposed Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge insurgence. That being so, there were two decent courses of action available to Chomsky once he discovered what their victory meant in practice. He could have publicly acknowledged that he had made a colossal mistake of political judgment; or he could simply have remained silent. He did neither.

Instead, Chomsky used the Cambodian episode as a peg on which to hang a series of sanctimonious tirades against the political partisanship of the Western media. (Some of these writings were co-authored with E. S. Herman; I assume that Chomsky stands by the various documents he has published whether as sole author or as co-author, and I do not distinguish the two categories in

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what follows.) According to Chomsky, the Western press gave prominence to Cambodian massacres, accepting every allegation as true and printing exaggerated figures of numbers killed, because the Khmers Rouges were Communists; where comparable atrocities were committed by "our" side, they were swept under the carpet by a combination of governmental obfuscation and commercial pressure on press freedom. Why, he repeatedly asked, have the Western media not paid comparable attention to the atrocities committed by the U.S.-supported Indonesian government in ex-Portuguese East Timor? (A puzzling question: East Timor is extremely remote, lacking a friendly frontier across which refugees can escape with their stories, and yet my daily paper, the London *Times,* has in fact carried reasonable coverage of the continuing Indonesian atrocities.)

For Chomsky, the Cambodian episode was a demonstration of how "intellectuals often tend to provide services for state propaganda," as he wrote in 1981. In the case of "bloodbaths committed by official enemies," as in Cambodia, the Western media overlook the likelihood that refugees will retail exaggerated or fabricated accounts of the horrors of the regime they have left, and unquestioningly quote the highest available estimates of numbers killed. Chomsky noted that George McGovern was widely reported in 1978 as quoting a figure of 2.3 million Cambodians killed under the Khmers Rouges, a figure that was almost certainly too high (though Chomsky does not mention the figure quoted by the Communist government of Vietnam—a source presumably untainted by subservience to U.S. interests—which was three million).

Faced with events as terrible as those which occurred in Cambodia, a natural reaction is to feel that their horror makes our petty day-to-day concerns fade into insignificance. Reading Chomsky's repeated pedantic, self-righteous quibbling in response to the many writers who have objected to his position on the Cambodia massacres—most of whom can be shown to have distorted a remark of Chomsky's by quoting out of context here, or overlooked some qualification in his writing there, as is almost impossible to avoid in practice and as Chomsky has in turn done when discussing his critics—it becomes difficult to resist the conclusion that, in Chomsky's mind, the most important issue raised by events in Cambodia is the correctness of Noam Chomsky's line. As Murray Rothbard wrote in *The Libertarian Review* in 1977:

> Chomsky and Herman dismiss accounts of Cambodian refugees as "at best second-hand." Apart from a striking callousness toward the victims of terror, one wonders how we can get more first-hand accounts of a country which has been tightly sealed off from the outside world by its rulers. There is also the Chomsky-Herman statement that Cambodian executions "have numbered at most in the thousands," the "at most" striking a piquant note reminiscent of Stalinist apologetics of the 1930s . . . . After stating that Samphan concedes a million deaths during the war, they assert that "nowhere in [an interview reported to have been given by Khieu Samphan to an Italian journalist] does Khieu Samphan suggest that the million post-war deaths were a result of official policies . . . ." And yet, the report of the interview . . . says as follows: the Italian correspondent: "If 1 million persons died in the fighting, what happened to the remaining 1 million?" To which Samphan replied: "It's incredible how concerned you Westerners are about war criminals."

It should be said that there is now real doubt about the authenticity of this interview, but that scarcely seems relevant to Chomsky's comment on Samphan's statements as reported.

Chomsky has never actually denied that a large proportion of the population of Cambodia was murdered by the Khmers Rouges. He could not deny it. Instead, he has consistently tried to change the subject—to suggest that this is not the central issue of recent Cambodian history. William Shawcross is a writer with impeccable credentials as an

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opponent of American imperialism: his book, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia,* is a widely respected indictment of America's secret and illegal war in Cambodia between 1969 and 1975. In 1981 Shawcross commented on Chomsky's writings about Cambodia:

> By continually concentrating on mistakes which journalists and writers made and on the way in which western governments exploited the stories out of Kampuchea, he deflected attention from the far more important issue . . . . His political influence is such that he could have played an important part in mobilizing opinion against the Khmer Rouge . . . . Instead Chomsky's well-known views helped lull many people throughout the world into the idle illusion that the horror stories about the Khmer Rouge were either planted by the CIA, fabricated by journalists or both. That is a sorry role.

Let me now turn to the other case of genocide to which my essay on Chomsky alluded: the Nazi Holocaust of the early 1940s. Here there is scarcely any room for dispute about the important facts, and educated Americans and Britons are fairly well aware of them. Several million men, women, and children were deliberately murdered, often in unimaginably cruel ways, for no reason other than their ancestry. This was not a case (as, arguably, Cambodia was) of a small, backward nation being caught up in global political struggles beyond the comprehension of its inhabitants. Early-twentieth-century Germany was one of the heartlands of Western civilization; it had about as good a claim as any nation in the world to represent the summit of mankind's achievements in the domains of art, philosophy, technology, and commerce. Surely it is vitally important, not just as a duty to the memory of the victims of Nazism but also as a duty to ourselves and our descendants, to keep alive the knowledge of what happened under the Nazis. The Holocaust has crucial lessons to teach us about the fragility of civilization, the dangers of excessive respect for authority, the fact that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance and that "it could happen here."

Memories are short, and many of the acts carried out on a routine basis in Nazi Germany are difficult to contemplate without nausea. I do not wish to dwell at unnecessary length on harrowing details, but let me remind the reader of the caliber of evil under discussion by quoting just one horror to stand for the many whose details are readily accessible in our libraries. It happened that, the day after Chomsky's threat of litigation was first reported to me, the London *Times* reported the death in Chile of Walter Rauff, the last surviving major Nazi mass-murderer. In 1941, Rauff had taken charge of the SS murder squads, who at the time were executing their many victims by shooting. "The most important consideration for me," Rauff told a postwar interrogator, "was that the shootings were a terrible ordeal for the men concerned, which could be relieved by using a gas lorry." So Rauff invented and ordered the construction of mobile gas chambers, forerunners of the fixed gas chambers that would be introduced in the camps in mid-1942. As Tom Bower wrote in the *Times*:

> Whole families would be sealed in a lorry and driven to a pit for burial. As the lorry fumes slowly filled the container, there would inevitably be hysterical, frantic sounds from within . . . . [An inspector reported that] the SS operators were being hampered by a series of unfortunate teething problems . . . . The victims' faces were "horribly distorted"; bodies—described in one memorandum as "the cargo"—were covered with excrement and vomit . . . . [T]he SS squads . . . complain[ed] of headaches . . . .

These things, and many others equally horrible, occurred not long ago, just a few hundred miles from where I am sitting. Surely we can have few public duties more solemn than that of maintaining the memory of what the Nazis did, doing nothing that might help to blur that memory or hide from future generations the risks of allowing authoritarian tendencies to go unchecked.

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Unfortunately, there are a number of Nazi apologists in France, the United States, and elsewhere, who profess to believe, and try to persuade others to believe, that the Holocaust never happened: stories of six million victims of Nazi murder are the "hoax of the twentieth century," to quote the title of one of their books. Robert Faurisson, an associate professor at the University of Lyons, was a member of this group, who came to widespread public attention in 1980-81 as defendant in a number of criminal and civil actions arising out of a book he had written propagating the no-holocaust theory; he was suspended from his teaching post in order to avoid student disturbances. In July 1981 Faurisson was found guilty of incitement to racial hatred and violence, and was found to have libeled a Jewish historian whom he had described as a "manipulator" and "fabricator" of documents. Faurisson was given a three-month suspended sentence and had to pay about four thousand dollars in fines and damages as well as massive legal costs.

While Faurisson's case was pending, Chomsky lent his support to Faurisson in two ways. He put his name to a petition calling for freedom of speech for Faurisson; and he contributed a six-page preface to a new book by Faurisson, *Memoir in defense against those who accuse me of having falsified history*—this book argues specifically that Nazi camps had contained no such things as gas chambers. (The translation of Faurisson's title, and further translations below, are my own.) I have read Faurisson's *Memoir*. It is cleverly done; a young person with little independent awareness of the facts might be impressed. I do not believe that a serious student of the Nazi period could take the argument seriously.

These two actions provoked an uproar in France and elsewhere on the Continent. Chomsky's response to this uproar has consistently been to insist that what he did was no more than to uphold the freedom to express opinions irrespective of their merit or lack of merit. I agree with Chomsky that Faurisson is entitled to that right (and I share with Chomsky some doubts about the French laws under which Faurisson was punished, just as I object to the analogous laws in my own country). Nevertheless, Chomsky's response is quite unacceptable, for several reasons.

In the first place, the petition Chomsky signed is far from presenting Faurisson as someone whose views, though ludicrous and abhorrent, must on principle be allowed to be expressed: "Dr Robert Faurisson has served as a respected professor of twentieth-century French literature and document criticism for over four years . . . . Since 1974 he has been conducting extensive independent historical research into the 'Holocaust' question . . . ." The petition states that attempts have been made to end Faurisson's research by "denying him access to public libraries and archives," which is apparently false. It describes Faurisson as "making his findings public"—the word "findings," according to my understanding of English and according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (though, Chomsky has since claimed, not to him), connotes truth or authoritativeness rather than mere opinion.

There is a duty to defend freedom of expression even for Nazi apologists; there is no duty to talk about them as if they were earnest, unjustly slandered seekers after truth. Nevertheless, the petition signature was possibly a minor misjudgment. In a totally different league of seriousness was the preface for Faurisson's book. The reason why distinguished men are invited to contribute prefaces to books by undistinguished authors—as Chomsky must be well aware—is that they help the books to sell (and thus to propagate the ideas they contain). Noam Chomsky's name is included on the cover of Faurisson's book in bold capitals—for what purpose, other than to attract potential readers' attention? Certainly, Chomsky does not suggest that he agrees with Faurisson's argument; he states that he has not read the book, though he has said elsewhere that he is familiar with the general nature of Faurisson's opinions. But that is not the point: a preface by a famous man achieves its public-

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relations result simply by existing, rather than by what it says. When the book was published, I was living in Switzerland and reading the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, surely one of the most soberly unsensational newspapers in the world. After noting that Chomsky presents the issue as one of freedom of expression, it commented: "This famous linguist has written a preface to a book which he has not himself read, without sparing a thought for the fact that with his fine-sounding name he is lending Faurisson moral support with respect to the issue of substance too."

Furthermore, Chomsky's preface is *not* exclusively about the free-speech issue. The last of its six pages is an attempt to exonerate Faurisson from the charges of anti-semitism and neo-Nazism. Chomsky suggests that Faurisson is "a relatively apolitical sort of liberal." In November 1980 this apolitical liberal announced on French radio that "the alleged massacre in gas chambers and the genocide of the Jews is part of one and the same lie, a gigantic political and financial racket for the benefit of Israel and international Zionism."

Chomsky reacted with fury (his word) to the storm of criticism that broke over him in the wake of the Faurisson affair. In a *Le Monde* interview he commented loftily that the French were "hysterical" on the subject; French intellectual life was infected by a "taste for the irrational and a contempt for facts." His innocent action would have aroused no special attention in a country such as the United States which possessed a proper respect for civil liberties, Chomsky explained, apparently oblivious to the reasons why Nazi genocide might be a more sensitive issue for Frenchmen than for someone who spent the war years as a teenager in Pennsylvania. Or perhaps "oblivious" is not the right word; Chomsky noted that "under the German occupation, collaboration with the occupier was very common in France—but the fact that Frenchmen still feel guilty is no reason for them to try to stop someone expressing his views."

An interviewer for *Libération* invited Chomsky to "take your position to the logical extreme: would you have contributed a preface to *Mein Kampf*?" Chomsky twice evaded the question.

Nevertheless, faced with such unanimity of criticism, Chomsky seems to have felt that some retreat was necessary. He claimed in *Le Monde* that "I never authorized the publication of my text as either a preface or a note in Faurisson's book." Even if that were true, Chomsky immediately destroyed its moral force by adding that the use as a preface "does not displease me. I do not feel that it has been used in an inappropriate way." But in any case it is very difficult to take Chomsky's disclaimer at face value. A few days later he explained that Faurisson's publisher had asked him to write a text and that Chomsky told him "to use it as he wished. He chose to put it in the book." What else could he have done with it? Furthermore, at a date when it was too late to change the contents of the book, Chomsky wrote a letter to the publisher which ran in part as follows:

> I have received a pile of letters from France demanding that I retract the piece I sent you on civil liberties and on Faurisson. The general tone of what these people write shows that the general level of hysteria is so high that no-one will pay any attention to the facts anyway, and the whole anti-imperialist effort will be undermined by a campaign to associate me with neo-Nazism. Reluctantly, I am finally inclined to agree. I don't know what the present situation is. If publication is not already in hand, I definitely suggest that you do not put [my piece] in a book of Faurisson's (or in what you were intending to publish), but either drop the piece or publish it elsewhere. I'm sorry . . . .

This letter, quoted by the recipient and never disowned by Chomsky, implies (a) that at the time he wrote it Chomsky expected his essay might be used, with his approval, in a book by Faurisson, and (b) that Chomsky's reason for withdrawing approval was not that he had become aware

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of moral objections to this course of action but that he saw it as a tactical error which might hamper him in furthering his own political goals.

We all make mistakes. I have done things in my time of which I am ashamed (and I try to learn from them). Chomsky's errors in connection with the Faurisson affair were grave ones, but he would deserve respect if, realizing what he had done, he had loudly and decisively dissociated himself from Faurisson's views and expressed contrition for the support he had unthinkingly lent to the case of neo-Nazism. He had every opportunity to do this. Instead, he responded (and continues to respond) to criticism with the same brand of angry, pedantic quibbling as in the Cambodian case—quibbling which seems to reveal no awareness of the enormity of the human issues he has entangled himself with. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, writing in *Esprit,* concludes that it is clear "what makes Chomsky run. What matters to him isn't gas chambers; it has very little to do with Faurisson, and only secondarily with freedom of expression. First and foremost it is Noam Chomsky."

What was I to make of these episodes in my thumbnail sketch of Chomsky's career? Surely it would have been bizarrely irresponsible to ignore them. After careful thought I included the passage I have already quoted, which seemed (and still seems) to me both decently restrained and as accurately informative as possible, given the extreme complexity of the facts that I had to squeeze into a few dozen words. There was no suggestion from the editor or from either publisher that they saw my remarks as out of place in a book such as they were producing—until Chomsky's libel threat was received, and they set out to escape what I saw as their moral obligation to continue to print the essay I had written.

As far as Chomsky's threat is concerned, I do not believe it had any legal substance. I am advised that even under English libel law, which is notoriously far more favorable to plaintiffs than American law, what I wrote could not have given rise to a successful action. Indeed, it seemed that Lord Bullock's side did not take the threat of legal action seriously themselves. My immediate reaction, when first informed that Chomsky had complained about my wording, was to offer detailed references to substantiate my statements. Lord Bullock's assistant replied, with amusement, that Chomsky's letter itself gave so much detail about his interventions as to make substantiation by me quite unnecessary. Even when, later, Harper & Row announced that they were disposed to take Chomsky's threat seriously, Lord Bullock's assistant admitted that he did not believe that Chomsky had a chance of winning an action. And it is very difficult to accept that Harper & Row was sincere in claiming to believe that Chomsky had a case, seeing that they never asked me to substantiate any of the points I had made in the offending passage (as I could easily have done), despite the fact that truth is a complete defense to a libel charge under American law. If one seeks an explanation of Harper & Row's willingness to yield to Chomsky's demands, it is perhaps more relevant to note that Chomsky is an influential and, presumably, profitable author and that Harper & Row is the publisher of some of Chomsky's best-selling books and of a successful series of which Chomsky is co-editor (just as, for its part, Fontana/Collins is Chomsky's main publisher in England). Even if a libel action had been a plausible possibility, this would surely have been a case for "sue and be damned"; but I do not believe that anyone involved in this episode regarded the prospect of litigation as anything more than a convenient pretext.

Lord Bullock seemed to wish me to believe that the libel threat left him no options —though this was never said in so many words, and it is manifestly untrue. In his position, even if I were genuinely frightened of a risk to my personal finances from hypothetical litigation, I would far rather omit an entry altogether than accept political censorship by its subject. As Hitler's biographer, Lord Bullock should know better than

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most that the historical truth about Nazism is not a trivial matter about which influential men can be allowed to indulge in thoughtless posturing in the unnoticed margins of their careers.

But I accept that Lord Bullock was under pressure from his publishers, Harper & Row. It is they who must receive the lion's share of blame for this sorry episode. The role of Harper & Row in the affair is to my mind unspeakable. It is beyond my comprehension how the staff of a respectable publishing house could bring themselves to yield precipitately to Chomsky's demands, whether or not this was in their firm's financial interest. I for one intend to avoid buying books published by Harper & Row in the future. To do so would feel too much like spitting on the graves of millions of victims of Nazi and Cambodian genocide.

Finally, what of Noam Chomsky?

Chomsky is a man for whom freedom of expression is a central concern. He recurs again and again in his comments on the Faurisson episode to the importance of freedom of expression, and the duty to grant it not merely to those who use it in ways we approve but also to those who use it in ways we dislike. The right to express falsehoods is as sacred as the right to express truths. "I had thought . . . that all of this was settled in the eighteenth century," Chomsky remarks, portraying himself as baffled by criticism of his Faurisson preface; he quotes as axiomatic the ringing words attributed to Voltaire: "I detest what you write, but I would give my life to make it possible for you to continue to write."

What can one say of a man who angrily insists that freedom of expression is an absolute value, taking precedence over respect for the laws of a civilized and friendly nation, when it is a question of protecting lies about the murder of millions; but who rushes to law in order to suppress freedom of expression, when it is a question of the truth about Noam Chomsky?

Actual legal censorship is of course quite limited in scope in the Western world. But sometimes business relationships can be used to suppress the expression of views which the law does not concern itself with. Chomsky has urged, with passion and rhetorical skill, that commercial considerations produce a "corporate censorship" in the West comparable to the state censorship that occurs elsewhere. No doubt there is a measure of truth in this. Yet the only individual whom I personally have known to make use, as it seems, of this censorship mechanism is Noam Chomsky.

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The Beckmann retrospective: the early work

by Dan Hofstadter

Cradled in one hand, the cat peers up past a rugged terrain of bodice and beads into Fridel's aging, pain-illuminated face. Fridel looks hurt, presents her wrist as if the cat has scratched her, but there isn't any scratch at all.

Fridel Battenburg, Frankfurt, 1920: Max Beckmann's well-known portrait of the woman who hasn't been scratched, a study in the ambiguities of suffering. Like all portraits it is also to some degree a self-portrait, especially in that Beckmann adored Fridel and often saw himself in her. Over and over her gentle, haggard face appears in his paintings and drawings; we wish we knew more about their friendship. We do know this: that whenever his life burned down to precarious embers, he turned to her; that she was a dedicated and much-admired musician; and that he called her "the Cat" on account of her odd blend of fondness and detachment.

Fridel Battenburg has left a description of the young Max Beckmann as he was in 1906, the year of his marriage to Minna Tube. In a recently published letter she told of the visit she received in Frankfurt from the newlyweds, who were then on their honeymoon. Beautiful blonde Minna, with her all-seeing eyes and strong expressive hands, was an apparition; her laugh seemed to beat time. "We were standing together on the bridge over the carp pond at the Frankfurt Zoo when Beckmann said, 'The poor carp, they look at me so hungrily . . . . I'd give them something to eat, but I don't have anything edible on me. I'd throw them my wallet . . . but there's virtually nothing in it.' Then we made music: Beckmann sat down at the piano and played, though he couldn't play at all, and what he played was a wild grand beautiful rhapsody—beautiful I mean in its sorrow." One can almost see the famous, Punch-like chin lurching forward over the keyboard.

That chin was perfect for the role it would play amid the Punch-and-Judy violence of his autobiographical paintings. He would draw it many times, moulding it into the shape of a shark's head or a darning last, amazed, I suspect, that anything so silly could also look like a blunt instrument. The chin's sinister clownishness is already sensed in Beckmann's earliest known self-portrait. Around 1900, when he was sixteen or so, he depicted himself in profile, the chin projecting peninsula-wise into a deep blue sky. The sky is full of soap bubbles and in his hand rests a bubble-pipe like a little horn. Yet there is something hulking and demented-looking about the young Beckmann. He resembles an escapee from an asylum—a gangling, sadistic moron who'd smilingly hug you to death.

Again and again the early paintings draw us back to the fact of Beckmann's uprootedness. His father, a real-estate agent and flour merchant in Leipzig, died in 1894 when the boy was ten. Sent to a boarding school in Gandersheim, Beckmann beguiled

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his loneliness by drawing. One childhood watercolor, illustrating a fairy tale, tried to solve the riddle of eternity. Later he studied painting at the Kunstschule in Weimar, where he became fast friends with Ugi Battenburg, Fridel's future husband. At the school's *Faschingfest* he met Minna, whom he married at age twenty-two.

The years of Beckmann's apprenticeship are especially well represented in "Max Beckmann—Retrospective," the large exhibition mounted by the Haus der Kunst in Munich, which travelled to the Nationalgalerie in Berlin (where I caught it) before crossing the Atlantic. It can now be seen at the Saint Louis Art Museum.[1] Carla Schulz-Hoffman and Judith C. Weiss, the exhibition's curators, have had remarkable success in assembling scores of paintings, drawings, and prints from all over Germany and the United States. Though most of the nine great triptychs apparently proved difficult to borrow on this occasion—there were only four in Berlin—this Beckmann show is the largest we've had in America since the one arranged by Peter Selz at the Museum of Modern Art in 1964. Along with generous samplings of the paintings of all periods, we are offered a comprehensive selection of the artist's astonishing prints and drawings, which alone would merit days of study. Probably we won't get another chance to scrutinize so many of his pictures together for many years.

Obliged by the Nazis to flee Germany, spurned by the "Bosch"-wary Parisians, ignored by the Dutch during his years of exile in Amsterdam, and finally received with open arms in of all places St. Louis, Missouri, Max Beckmann was the stepchild of the modern art establishment. Though he moved to New York and died outside his apartment on West Sixty-ninth Street in 1953, New Yorkers have had scant exposure to his work. MOMA has kicked him upstairs, or at least into an exhibition space of lesser interest; no editor has ever cared to arrange for the translation of his illustrated war letters; and even the present exhibition goes to St. Louis and Los Angeles but not New York. Indeed the neglect of his contribution is the most salient error in the error-studded doctrines of American formalist orthodoxy. The foolishness seems compounded when we reflect that Beckmann's mature pictures are largely of the abstract sort so popular here for the past forty years. Along with Picasso's work, they form the finest example of public-scaled, confessional, do-it-over-as-you-go-along painting. Beckmann was the great painterly improviser of the dream- and myth-conscious post-Freudian world, and no one can grasp the richness of our own art who does not also attend to his. Yet we seem to feel we can dispense with him.

For the Germans the situation is different. Germany needs Beckmann; she also *has* him. From the Kaiser to Hitler, Beckmann lived through it all, made sense of it all, rose prodigiously above it all; as a world-historical ghost he was made to order. And as a world-historical ghost he has been explicated—forward and backward, up and down. The Beckmann scholars have created a philosophical language with a wonderfully expressive and really Beckmannesque tone that encompasses all modern German cultural history. The master's paintings are matched against passages from Nietzsche or Schopenhauer, and his theosophical interests are dissected. There is only one hitch here: Beckmann wasn't a ghost but a flesh-and-blood mortal. And just as he bears looking at as a man, and one moreover with fairly violent obsessions about sex and death, so his paintings bear looking at as arrangements of form and color. One notes the absence of a truly artistic perspective in this sort of art history.

What is one to make, for example, of the five educational leaflets on sale in the Berlin museum discussing the phases of Beckmann's career? The highly intelligent texts

1 "Max Beckmann—Retrospective" was at the Haus der Kunst in Munich from February 25 to April 23, and at the Nationalgalerie in Berlin from May 18 to July 29. It will be on view in St. Louis until November 4 before traveling to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where it will be on view from December 9 to February 3, 1985.

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are set in long, daunting columns of Helvetica or the like; the master's evolution unfolds with all the pep of Hegel's *Phenomenology.* Likewise the huge catalogue, with its many abstruse essays and learned explications of the pictures, is remarkable for its lack of interest in Beckmann the man, in the strictly painterly aspects of his production, or in his debt to the art of the past, especially El Greco and the late Goya.[2] Agog with indifference, one abandons this labyrinth for the fresh air of Beckmann's own brilliant writings or the concrete observations and witty syntheses of Matthias Eberle's *Max Beckmann, Die Nacht: Passion ohne Erlösung,* an attractively designed paperback that was selling briskly in the Berlin museum's bookshop.[3] Yet even Mr. Eberle "reads" Beckmann as if his images were a wall of hieroglyphs; it's just that he does it lightly and well. What a pleasant surprise when at last one realizes that Beckmann isn't cryptic, indeed, that his narrative intentions are relatively clear, especially if one follows his work from the beginning.

In his earliest phase, Beckmann reveals a startling morbid streak. Whatever the hindrances to his working it off on canvas—and one was that morbidity offered no clue as to how to handle space—he didn't balk at showing the sick side of grief. In the same year he got married and played the piano for Fridel Battenburg, his mother died very painfully of cancer. The *Large Death Scene* and *Small Death Scene* he painted in response to his renewed orphanhood mix a Nabi-type "intimism" with a Munch-like emotional intensity, and even today retain the power to shock. They not only vivify grief and dread, as Munch had done, they caricature it as well. Beckmann so contorts the features, the hands, and in some cases the bodies of the mourners that he may be justly suspected of "harboring designs," and very unpleasant ones at that, upon these poor souls. Could only a mocking brutality guard against the devitalizing effect of sorrow? Even the face of the man in black representing the artist himself is wrung into a frightful grimace, so that what looks like a latex disguise fastened too tightly at the neck is really only the stupid mask of pain.

Sent to Florence by the German Artists' Association, Beckmann painted his first really pungent self-portrait at his lodgings in the Villa Romana, thereby initiating a long and remarkable self-portrait series. Facing the mirror so that his peninsular chin lost relief, he coaxed his likeness onto the canvas with diaphanous touches. He stands before us as a young man of the world in Wilhelminian smoking jacket and stiff-collared shirt; but buried in the black mass of the jacket is a cigarette-holding hand so eerily foreshortened that it looks for an instant like some strange stump of an organ, perhaps a shriveled womb. The hand is rotated to expose the underside of the wrist as if the artist were a madman showing his stigmata; this telltale gesture would be repeated in several of Beckmann's later self-portraits. It reveals for the first time what would become abundantly clear in Beckmann's subsequent images, namely that rather like Dürer he identified in an earnest, batty sort of way with Jesus Christ.

In Berlin, his adopted and beloved city, Beckmann showed his pictures at the Sezession and at the gallery of his distinguished friend Paul Cassirer; he was invited almost everywhere that mattered; he received a commission for the portraits of the influential Countess Augusta von Hagen. In effect he found himself lionized, and until the jackals tore at him a few seasons later he kept a properly leonine journal. Transcribed from his difficult handwriting by Hans Kinkel, who also furnished scrupulous notes to the text, *Leben in Berlin: Tagebuch 1908-1909* affords an intriguing view into the

2 The English-language edition of the catalogue, *Max Beckmann: Retrospective,* was published by The Saint Louis Art Museum in association with Prestel-Verlag in Munich and W. W. Norton in New York: 483 pages, $30.

3 *Max Beckmann, Die Nacht: Passion ohne Erlösung* was published this year by Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag in Frankfurt am Main.

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artist's studio and into the artistic circles of the prewar German capital.[4] We can watch Beckmann posing models, choosing colors, looking at shows, making the rounds of his colleagues and patrons; he can be trenchant ("structure is the handwriting of a picture"), devastating ("better to lock up those smart soul-clowns of art-historians and work for my own ends"), and self-illuminating in his enthusiasms: "Recently saw a Courbet *Hallali* at Cassirer's. A hunting party has gathered at the end of the hunt and a huntsman sounds the mort in the gathering dusk. Two women recline with some men on the grass in the foreground beside the hounds and dead roebuck and other game. Everything is cut out darkly against a light blue sky. A strangely peaceful, composed atmosphere fills the scene, and the huntsman becomes willy-nilly a symbolic figure as he blasts his jubilation from the picture. Something of a sweet clear triumph hovers impalpably over the whole. On the turf the men sit unmoving and the note of the horn lingers on the clear air and it is evening."

It is extraordinary how much of his own symbolic coin (the killers, the prey, the horn, the night) Beckmann was able to find ready-minted in this painting by Courbet. His first picture on the theme of hunter and hunted he based however on "prototypes" by other French masters. The *Scene from the Destruction of Messina,* whose composition recalls Poussin's *The Rape of the Sabines* and Delacroix's *The Massacre at Chios,* was inspired by an article in the 1908 New Year's Eve edition of the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger.* Three days earlier the city of Messina had been almost wholly destroyed by an earthquake; eighty-four thousand people had been killed, and many of the survivors had been temporarily lodged in the ruins of the town's customs house. An Italian physician quoted by the *Lokal-Anzeiger* reported an episode in which the customs house had been captured by a mob of half-naked miscreants "in whose eyes could be read . . . the desire to murder and rape. The remaining customs guards could offer them no resistance."

The picture that Beckmann painted of this mass murder and gang-rape may be ransacked for symbols, or projected against a backdrop of social or personal destiny, or even enjoyed as pure painting, though that is difficult since it is so horrible. But then all Beckmann's early disaster scenes—which include the huge *The Sinking of the Titanic* (1912) and *Battle of the Amazons* (1911)—are horrible. They crawl with bodies like the storied walls of some hideous old palace, and so much of the surface represents flesh that the paint film ends up seeming positively dermatological. It oozes and festers and shimmers with the tints of bruises; the artist in his diary entry exults over the discovery of a "dirty rose-violet" as nauseating as it sounds. Sometimes the surface cools off a bit, turning a gangrenous green, but the nodes of irritation keep on re-emerging, now in a welter of strokes or small shapes, now in the brutality of the delinquent figures. The way the affliction boils up reminds me of what seamstresses say about swallowed needles, that much later they worm their way free and poke out from odd parts of the body.

Messina is plagued by two confusions. First, the artist seems uncertain whether he is painting a sort of Cézannesque frieze or a composition in deep space; his diary reflects this muddle. Second, he has not decided whether he should proceed by pure invention or by posing models, with the result that the painting is academically incorrect yet also devoid of imaginative life (as the critics at the Sezession pointedly observed). The subject itself poses a quandary. Even more then Cézanne, the young Beckmann was obsessed by rape; no modern painter save Delacroix had lingered so devotedly on the theme of sexual violence. But the arresting character of this obsession was veiled by the painting's exoticism and grandiosity, by its evident remoteness from the bourgeois

4 This book, long out of print, has recently been republished by Prestel-Verlag in Munich. The first edition (1966) included a second volume covering the years 1912-1913.

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life of the Berliner who had painted it. Hence this problem: that the crudely daubed drama of the half-naked rapists and their victims doesn't seem worked by passion, that it exudes no intimacy of heart or will. Only a man disposed to abandon his observer status, to climb inside his picture and rehearse his story, could find a solution to this problem. Beckmann was such a man; yet even he took ten years to find it.

Throughout the Berlin diary, Beckmann eyes his own and other people's paintings. Are they "personal"?—that is the question. Frau von Bülow's work is well done but nonpersonal; Klinger's is inartistic but fortunately highly personal. And Beckmann's? He seems troubled, vaguely aware that it is not as personal as it might be. Messina is not Berlin. The flux and reflux of life, the surfeit and waning of the will must be experienced firsthand. He reads Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and paces in the green, leaf-filtered light of the beautiful little house he has built for himself at Hermsdorf. War is perhaps to be welcomed; it will put right a rotten civilization and afford a chance for education through pain. Nonetheless he is filled with foreboding. One day in the Stettiner Bahnhof he hears a commotion and a loud torrent of profanity. A constable has brutally thrown a man to the floor, then led him off still lamenting his maltreatment. "A dog he called me, a dog!" cries the man in his Berlin dialect. *"Ik! Ik ik bin doch auch ein Mensch."* ("But I too am a human being.") And the man is marched away through the snowy station square, collecting a crowd of onlookers that turns at length into a singular, and perhaps even very usable, pattern in black and white.

In September of 1914 Max Beckmann went to war, rather in the manner of a man putting a daring question to a nasty mob—asking for trouble, in the common phrase. Since he returned the next year, one gathers that he got a reply and that it was both satisfactory and unpleasant. What the Germans call "the Beckmann literature" has tended more and more to assume that trench warfare "chastened" him and turned him into an anti-militarist; thus one is surprised to arrive at the end of the newly available war letters, *Briefe im Kriege,*[5] without once encountering the suitably chastened personage in question. Partly of course this is because Beckmann had never espoused militaristic opinions in the first place: alive to the vitality of the French and Russian cultures, indifferent to German imperialism, he felt no inclination to inflate the national ego. Still, he entered the war with a sort of ardor that experience slowly chilled, and his distillation of that experience in letters, drawings, and, later, in his first mature paintings, hints at darker reasons for his complex evolution.

Beckman was thirty when the war began, a successful painter of lurid disaster scenes. Having received no military training, he was not liable to conscription. He joined a relief corps organized by the Countess von Hagen and was sent to East Prussia in September of 1914. It is from there that the first few letters come, only to break off in October; renewed in February of 1915, they are now sent mostly from Courtrai, in Flanders, where Beckmann has volunteered to serve as a medical orderly, and where he often comes under fire. The sketches depict military life, often from the point of view of the field hospital; one could even make a case that they offer more medical than war reportage. At the same time one learns that Beckmann is at work on a huge mural, overlooking a delousing station and depicting some uhlans and riflemen. Though Beckmann expresses plenty of pride in the courage and camara-

5 The new edition of the war letters is almost identical to the first edition originally published in Berlin in 1916 by Bruno Cassirer. The only difference is that the illustrations in that edition—chalk and pen drawings from the front—have been augmented by thirteen others first printed in the magazine *Kunst und Künstler* in 1914 and 1915. All the letters were written to Beckmann's wife Minna, who had remained in Berlin; later the couple edited them together, excising only a few brief passages. Dr. Peter Beckmann, the artist's son (and an eminent heart specialist, now retired), has also contributed a perceptive afterword to the present edition.

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derie of the troops, he never disparages the enemy, alluding to him rather with the sort of wry deference that La Fontaine's animal antagonists reserve for one another. No hostility, but no sense of futility either. The letters cease on June 12, 1915.

In an afterword to the present edition of the war letters, Beckmann's son Peter warns the reader against hunting in them for a sign of transition from the overwrought traditional paintings of the prewar period to the later, mature expressionism. "Eventually the steady dying and coming-to-be that he'd experienced during the war did indeed become a theme," notes Peter Beckmann, "but right to the end of the letters he kept his distance and remained the quintessential observer." It is this odd neutrality that packs such a heavy punch.

The danger for art was that Beckmann the artist would take a side—any side, including pacifism—but saved by a twistier compulsion, he did not. A letter of October 1914 from the Eastern Front, mentioning some dreadful scenes the artist had witnessed, suggests what the compulsion might have been: "The oftener one dies, the more intensely one lives." Did the artist expose himself to the spectacle of carnage in order to feel the exhilaration of survival? The drawings, made in the presence of death, are achingly alive: nervy squiggles claim the page, and the scrawlings of heads, intense as jack-o'-lanterns, attentively register individual symptoms of anxiety. Transferred to the Western Front, Beckmann stumbles through a landscape of hellish beauty, an embodiment of the "vitalistic" and "theosophical" currents of the age. On the ground, instinct strives against instinct (as in the Breughels in the nearby Brussels museum) while overhead all sorts of contraptions natter viciously about. On his way by train from Lille to Courtrai on the terrible black night of April 3, 1915, he marvels at the dreadful loveliness of the star shells, how like a congeries of wan faces they bloom for a few seconds over the dummy rolling stock and cardboard railway stations and then rapidly fade away. "It is amusing," he wrote—he used the word "amusing" a lot in his war letters—"that the much cursed and lamented life of peacetime now—with iron logic—appears as a vision of paradise." Later that April lots of wounded soldiers are brought to the Courtrai field hospital, one of whom, a man dying of a head wound, lies bleeding so badly that as soon as his bandage is changed it grows dark again. "Horrid, how around the left eye the face by degrees turned pellucid, like a broken porcelain bowl," he notes. As the combat grows fiercer, such experiences multiply; the war is getting rougher than Beckmann cares to admit. "Yesterday night duty. The poor men. Two stomach wounds and one bad brain contusion in the midst of a thunderstorm. The whole night a wrestling match with the unconscious man. The darkly lighted room, the night, lightning, stench of decay, and slipping of the . . . naked bodies into deepest despair."

Never at this period does Beckmann lose the painter's point of view. "For me war is a wonder, though rather an uncomfortable one," he writes; "my art gets its fill here." Soothed by an "amusing" sense of security, he looks out from the clinic into the awful night, wherein a spectral headlight shines beneath a solitary smokestack; here and there a star twinkles, for the battle dust is lifting; soon the ruins of Ypres will stretch out before him into a "pale lavender" horizon, no longer houses but a tableland of gutted frames overlooked by the "cold pink" carcass of a steeple. It is "awesome, awesome"; yet as his room fills up with thousands of wildly buzzing flies he feels for the first time that he has "had enough." He has garnered so much first-rate material that the horror is pictorialized in his head. "Ah, I wish that I could paint. Even here color is a tool I can't do without. When I think now of gray, green, and white, or black-yellow, sulfur-yellow, and violet, a tremor of desire comes over me. Then I do so wish the war were over . . . ."

Encountering this color-ravenous creature amid the fields of white crosses, the reader requires some presence of mind to know whether to fend him off like a vulture

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or lead him gently to a psychiatric nurse. And how dismayed Minna must have been to receive a stream of letters whose hidden message, despite the high degree of literary talent, was contained in its utter lack of tact, reassurances, warmth, longing, or interest in the child of their union. She too must have wondered whether a good nurse wasn't the ticket, and in October of 1915, along with tens of thousands of wounded and shell-shocked and dying boys who knew nothing of Nietzsche and cared less, the medical orderly and former war-addict Max Beckmann was evacuated from the Western Front. The Beckmann literature says he'd had a "nervous breakdown," whatever that may be; we may confidently assume he had had, in his own phrase, enough.

What is the moral of this tale—that a store of traumatic war memories was, for a painter of disasters, worth leaving a young family and risking life and limb? So it may seem to the reader of these letters, who may also feel that their author successfully steeled himself against all fear and sorrow. But Beckmann did suffer consciously on the Western Front, if only from a dream. On May 15, 1915, after ritualistically assuring Minna that the war was "quite agreeable," he writes of a dream "in which your mother had died. I have never in my life felt such pain. It reminds me of how I once dreamed that I must for some reason be separated from you forever. Then I felt a similar sadness. In real life painting consumes me. Ah, poor wretch, I can only live in dreams." As it happens Beckmann was close to Minna's mother in much the same way he'd been close to his own; one wonders if his ministrations in the Courtrai clinic had not somehow enabled him to revisit and eventually pass through an unfinished mourning. At all events, that letter was prophecy of the surest sort, for it foretold one thing that was already the case: Minna and Max *were* separated and would remain so forever. After his discharge Beckmann never returned to Berlin, but went instead to Frankfurt, to stay with Fridel and Ugi Battenburg.

"War," wrote Beckmann, "did not contradict but rather corroborated my convictions about human life." Such utterances have a quality that Matthias Eberle calls "depressive-defiant"; slightly overheated, this quality could turn into bluster or stage cruelty. Yet Beckmann's war drawings belied the bravado of his letters; less than totally frank in his writing, he was faithful to his feelings when he drew. These sketches, which develop a tangled figural space that seems observed from many viewpoints, frequently report on the pathetic aspects of war: what hasn't killed these German soldiers has made them immeasurably weaker by lopping off arms and legs. In a pen drawing called *Little Operation* we behold an operation on the groin and suddenly remember that the main figure in *Messina* is not a raped woman at all but a man clutching his genitals and moaning; the theme would be reprised in *The Bath* of 1930, in which a man in a bathtub screens his genitals from the gaze of a standing woman. The war drawings show Beckmann beginning to give up his emotional shield against his passionate half-conscious identification with the victims of affliction. *Ik bin doch auch ein Mensch,* complains the man beaten by the cop, complains the man who has lost some of his physical manhood to the instruments of mechanized slaughter; and progressively Beckmann outgrows the loathing that he (like every nurse) tends to feel for his dying charges and harkens to the same cry within himself: I too am a human being: I know what you must feel.

Doctor and patient, torturer and victim are confounded in Beckmann's art as they often seem to be in life. In *The Night* (1918-19), the first great masterpiece of his Frankfurt period and the distillation of his war experiences, a figure with a head bandage—one remembers the dying soldier he'd wrestled with on that thunderous night in the Courtrai hospital—turns up as a torturer with a mean grip, while a brute in a white coat pulls down the shade. These two, along with a hangman and a female accomplice in red, have broken into a family's din-

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ing room, knocked over crockery and candles, and strung up the paterfamilias. The man in the head bandage breaks the father's wrist while the man in the white coat kidnaps a not wholly unwilling child; the wife, stripped from the waist down, her hands bound, awaits inevitable violation. This scene, derived from rudimentary sketches depicting the sexual murder of a man, and based largely on Rembrandt's *The Shearing of Samson* at Frankfurt and Francesco Traini's trecento fresco *The Triumph of Death* in the Pisa *camposanto,* has been picked over by so many symbol-hunters that its power as narrative painting has been very nearly dispelled; one hopes that Mr. Eberle's light-handed guide to the subject has put an end to the sacred, tedious quest. He has observed that the dog howling disconsolately next to the horn-like speaker of the victrola is a pun on the old record logo bearing the slogan "His Master's Voice." That is very clever stuff, I think, and takes symbol hunting about as far as one would care to. The important thing is that Beckmann is no longer the observer here, but has entered the painting and become the torture victim himself, a fact he confessed by portraying his little son Peter as the abducted (and unfortunately none too recognizable) child. In contrast to *Messina,* this drama is worked *only* by passion; sensing this, we recognize that the artist has "closed" with his picture, that its import must be not only religious and political but also personal. The crucifixion of Christ and the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and the breakup of Beckmann's own family are telescoped into one image. By baring himself on canvas and literally painting himself into a corner, the artist assumes the role of victim. Yet he also elicits a masochistic emotional identification from the viewer—invites him, so to speak, to a painful act of co-creation—which is probably why a lot of sophisticated people can't abide *The Night.* Look at this disgusting painting: sure the upper left side shows wit, but it's wit of a filthy order, like the ingenuity that goes into making a rat's nest, where shreds of newspaper and goose down and heaven-knows-what serve some vile ratty purpose. Look at that leg: God, you could unscrew it; and all those hacked-up meaty gray forms on the left side, like the pile of fat and gristle at the edge of someone's plate . . . This is a painting that gets people to *react.*

Max Beckmann was perhaps the first painter to make canvas stretched on wood into a drum to rouse the passions: his brutal use of black suggests disjunctive rhythm rather than flowing melody. Tact of application would yield in his Frankfurt phase to a percussive attack as more and more he just slammed his big color notes together, revising everything as he went along. The colors matter—and vary more than you'd think—but they matter like the timbre of ancient ritual instruments, the clash of cymbals or the blast of one-note horns. The colors are held together by the weaving or plaiting of the virile black strokes. These strokes, swelling into sensible volumes like the leading in old church windows or the widening ascenders in a Gothic script, compress the hotter colors till they hiss. Beckmann overused black—his pictures can remind one of a country where there are too many priests—but the overuse is so distinctive that it compells acceptance, if not ravishment.

Rarely is any passage there just to strike a balance in the design. Beckmann didn't merely compose. The quirky patterns further what the old books call "the argument"—what we today might call the "plot"—so that pattern and plot wholly partake of each other. This circumstance sets a trap, and one that hasn't always been dodged by the artist's explicators: it is to think that Beckmann was hermetic. We've grown so used to modern pictorial storytelling taking a skewed path that we smugly assume that Beckmann's plots must be mysterious, that they must twist into a darkening fog; but really they illumine the emotions, and require only a bit of background information, pretty much like any art of the past. What mystery there is inheres mostly in the odd fact that a man with a paintbrush rather than a wand should show so keen a flair for the geometri-

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cal affinity of events, for the complementarity of past and future. This was a prophetic if not a divinatory flair, for Beckmann was nothing if not prophetic; yet he was most prophetic of all in his sense of pattern, of the dark disjointed scaffolding of life.

Like the coils of birds' guts in the old auguries, the visible sign of destiny in Beckmann's paintings is the pattern itself, the two-dimensional arrangement of people and things. From image to image the pattern gains or loses complexity, less raveled no doubt in the portraits and slighter landscapes, more densely woven in the larger group figurations that begin to emerge in Frankfurt. The pattern or structure is stylistically consistent. Partly inspired by medieval German picture-making, partly derived from the artist's visual and physical habits, it can be seen generating in his earliest work and becomes clear in *The Night.* Pick any painting and you can easily sketch the structure in the "colors of crime and virtue," as Beckmann called black and white.

In a lot of modern figure painting both the figures and the color planes, abstractly considered, seem somehow interwoven, so that every part corresponds with every other part. The structural invention in such painting could be likened to the tying of knots—how in order to cinch a bowline, for example, you must lead the "ogre" under the "bridge." Two ends must be hitched together so they hold; the right hand takes hold of one end and he left hand of the other and presto the knot is tied in a way the viewer never quite fathoms—his mind hangs in air. How, he asks, if this is *so,* can that also be *so*? It seems to him enchantingly impossible. Now Beckmann's knots are funny, because they mostly don't hold. In fact, they come apart. In many of the pictures he would do at Frankfurt the sensation of twining—which Cézanne, whom Beckmann greatly admired, used to express by interlacing his fingers—is absent by design. Upon serious inspection, the figures seem falsely knit in the space. They're contiguous, or literally tangential to one another, or turned apart in a way vestigially reminiscent of *fin-de-siècle* Northern pictorial choreography. The forms "butt" one another, or disappear behind one another, or appear interstitially sliced up; but they don't much interact, and they don't interweave. They don't dance. From behind tall totemic robed personages dollops of shapes push out, unconnected to anything else in the picture, and loopy, klutzy clocks and horns and gobs of limbs often pile up at the bottom, losing their identity as they scrabble into what seems a totally elastic foreground. If you pulled the metaphysical rope hard nothing would tighten—everything would come undone.

What is Beckmann starting to show us in these early Frankfurt pictures? Let's forget the symbolism and make an inventory of the objects themselves. Here are flowers and leeks and cats and rats, hurdy-gurdies and cellos and mandolins, pretty girls and cripples and masked or bandaged men, cigars and candles, iron footbridges and cranes, a synagogue . . . the list is endless, for Beckmann is showing us everything, giving us the works. Yet notice, he seems to be saying, how deep in the plot and pattern of it all something is tragically, comically, and vividly garbled. The world is not right, and no one is going to put it right. Objects do have this property, though: that if you fit them together in a certain way they speak volumes about their moral nature and consequently foretell their destiny. And that, in the years ahead, is what Max Beckmann would try to get them to do.

Editor's note: "The Beckmann retrospective: the later work" will appear in next month's issue.

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The *Pushcart Prize* story
by Bruce Bawer

Every year in the United States the editors of hundreds of little magazines produce thousands of issues containing tens of thousands of stories, essays, and poems. Somewhere in this frightening abundance of reading matter is the very finest and the very worst that the writers of America have to offer. And there's the rub—for although nobody, Lord knows, wants to miss out on this year's "Waste Land," it would be all but impossible for any one of us to poke through all those magazines to find it. That's where *The Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses* is supposed to come in. Issued yearly since 1976 by the Pushcart Press (with a well-distributed paperback version by Avon following hard upon), the series is intended, in the words of its founder-editor-publisher Bill Henderson, "to rescue some of the wonderful writing appearing in small presses from oblivion."

The Pushcart Prize, VIII is the 1983-84 edition, which means that it contains pieces originally published during 1982, republished in the hardcover *Pushcart Prize* volume in 1983, and distributed in the Avon paperback edition in 1984. Gail Godwin, in her introduction, quotes Henderson's words about rescuing wonderful writing from oblivion, and the back of the dustjacket quotes her quoting him. The front flap of the same jacket features a quotation from *Publishers Weekly* praising the book's "openness to new talent." Henderson wants to make absolutely certain, obviously, that we get the message that his book is not just another best-of-the-year anthology—he wants us to be convinced that it's a genuine attempt to preserve excellent but unheralded work written by relatively obscure writers and published originally by relatively obscure presses.

Unfortunately, the *Pushcart Prize* series is not what it cracks itself up to be. The majority of the writers and presses represented in the collection are far from obscure. Why, then, does the series exist? Mainly, one gathers, to save *Henderson* from sinking into oblivion. But we don't need to speculate. To our good fortune, Henderson has, in more than one essay, written candidly about how he came to establish the Pushcart Press, and, in turn, the *Pushcart Prize*[1]; to read these essays—and to read between a few lines—is to understand distinctly how the *Pushcart Prize* series came into being, and how it came to be exactly the sort of entity that it is today. With the ninth edition of the series due to be published soon, there could be no better time to explore the *Pushcart Prize* story.

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1 Henderson's essays "The Great American Novel" (published under the name Luke Walton) and "At Pushcart" both appeared in *The Publish-It-Yourself Handbook,* ed. Bill Henderson, revised edition (Pushcart/Harper & Row, 1980). "On Pushcart Press" appeared in *The Little Magazine in America: A Modern Documentary History,* ed. Elliott Anderson and Mary Kinzie (Pushcart, 1978).

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The story began when Henderson, a teenager on Philadelphia's Main Line, decided that he wanted to be a writer. Well, it wasn't so much that he wanted to be a writer as that he wanted, in Dorothy Parker's phrase, to have written. And to have been published. In short, he dreamed "of the New York Pub Day Cocktail Party Girls," dreamed of reenacting the "intoxications and fornications" of Norman Mailer, Ernest Hemingway, and Dylan Thomas, dreamed of the day when "all those literary groupies would tumble for me with my first Bill-Faulkner straight bourbon on the rocks. Like thousands of Great American Novelists, I sought truth, beauty, fame, fortune, and immortality. But what I really wanted was literary stallionship." So, at college, Henderson "jotted down the seven crucial facts of the age" and turned them into a novel.

> The facts were: (1) There is no sense of permanence in America. (2) Americans are rich. (3) Americans are lonely. (4) Americans are greedy. (5) The Bomb may drop. (6) The old American values are dead. (7) There is no sense of community in America. This final no-community fact was imitation Paul Goodman. I had just read Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* and was overwhelmed by him. I was overwhelmed by most good writers.

As one might imagine, the unconventional novel that sprang from this list of assumptions (it was essentially about "a Vassar girl . . . who had jilted me") did not impress the publishing house to which Henderson submitted it. Disgusted by the refusal of the greedy American marketplace to cut him in for a share, Henderson tossed his manuscript into a drawer and resigned himself to the cruel circumstance into which Fate had forced him: a graduate fellowship at Harvard. "I loitered for two weeks at Harvard, then got Bill-Faulkner drunk on the train home. My parents were upset. I smashed a glass on the kitchen floor and yelled, 'I want to be a writer!'" He then went back to Harvard and wrote short stories. "I tried the usual *Atlantic-Esquire-Harper's* circuit and received all the usual form rejections. When a friend suggested the little literary magazines, I snapped it was the big time or no time."

He went to Paris. He attended the Sorbonne ("to keep the draft board happy") and drank lots of wine and reworked his unconventional novel and "refused to read books, since I didn't want to be influenced" and put on a "dipso, soulful writer act." He went back to America and continued to work on the novel. He put in several levels of meaning, so that English professors would declare it a classic. When the work was finally done, he submitted it to the Harper & Row Prize Novel Contest. He lost. He tried it on Knopf. They rejected it. So did Farrar, Straus & Giroux and Little, Brown and McGraw-Hill and Doubleday. Henderson found an agent, and the agent sent it around. No luck. Finally, after two years of turndowns, the agent gave up and returned the manuscript to Henderson.

For most aspiring novelists—even those from the Main Line, by way of Harvard and the Sorbonne—this would have been the end of the line. But Henderson had something inestimably valuable that few other rejected first novelists can boast of: a "big-hearted, adventuresome" uncle with lots of money. This uncle, when apprised of the frustration of his young nephew's ardent desire to become a literary stallion, recognized that there was only one thing to do: set up his own publishing house, install Henderson as editor-in-chief, and present Henderson's novel, *The Galapagos Kid,* to the world. Henderson found this plan agreeable and added his own twist: in order to keep this vanity operation from looking like a vanity operation, he decided to publish his novel under a pseudonym—Luke Walton. (The name came from a Horatio Alger novel.) Under his own name, Henderson made arrangements for the printing and distribution of *The Galapagos Kid,* and invested his uncle's money in advertisements for the book in *The New York Times Book Review, The New York Review of Books,* and *Publishers Weekly.* Nautilus—for such was the name of

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the one-man publishing house—gave Henderson his education in self-publishing.

And what did he get out of all this? Not much. Some fair to good reviews in the Miami, San Antonio, and New Brunswick, New Jersey, papers; a not particularly favorable review in *The New York Times*; and not particularly spectacular sales. "In all," Henderson writes, "I sold about 500 copies and figured my losses at $10,000 for a decade of unpaid labor." (Meaning that ten years had passed since he'd decided that he wanted to be like Dylan Thomas. He was twenty-seven.) Some might reckon this a defeat, but not Bill Henderson. Five hundred copies were "respectable enough for the serious, underground sort that Luke Walton now imagined he was." Besides, even if he hadn't won fame and fortune and groupies, "I had made a few friends. I'd been reviewed in the *Times*. I'd tasted the bitch goddess and wasn't very impressed. And I had discovered the secret of publishing. Publishers exist to make money and make money to exist. [He was cutting class, one assumes, the day they taught that at Harvard.] My novel, and many like it, was rejected not because it was of poor quality or unloved, but because it would not contribute to profits. I knew that now from my own profit-and-loss sheet."

Henderson's vigorous promotional work on behalf of his author, Luke Walton, had attracted attention in the land of the bitch goddess—otherwise known as Publishers' Row—and Doubleday offered the plucky young man a job. Henderson leaped quickly enough into the goddess's lap. Apparently he had decided that if he could not become the great American novelist, he would become the great American editor. He was determined, he writes, to do all that he could to reform, from within, the crass system that had rejected him—to fight the mediocrity of commercial publishing by digging up some "fine literature" for Doubleday's list. Resolutely, he plowed through the firm's Himalayan slush piles in search of a masterpiece that he might rescue from the oblivion to which the avaricious, art-hating commercial publishing world had condemned it. Oddly enough, however, Henderson didn't come across anything he considered good enough to publish. It was unsettling. Here he was ready to play Spartacus, and there weren't any slaves to free. So much for being a crusading editor! But wait—he had an inspiration. It occurred to him that

> perhaps the reason so little good work was arriving at houses like Doubleday was not only that most commercial firms didn't want to publish it, but also that so much junk was being issued with big-bucks sound and fury that authors had stopped writing good books. Perhaps many of them had succumbed to the despair I felt after years of rejection. [N.B. Two years.]
>
> Writers had to be wised up, I thought. They should know that they didn't need commercial publishers of any sort. And they needed a book to tell them that.

The book, which Henderson soon began compiling, was *The Publish-It-Yourself Handbook: Literary Tradition and How-To*. In its pages, Henderson and a number of other self-published writers recount their inability to secure contracts with commercial publishers, describe how they had managed to get their work between covers anyway, and explain to the reader how he might do the same thing. The book allowed Henderson to become a crusading editor after all. He was, to be sure, hardly performing a public service: if one reads through the *Handbook*, one soon discovers that none of the contributors could claim to have made a living from self-publishing; most of them, in order to turn a profit, ended up handing their works over to commercial publishers or selling reprint rights to the usual paperback houses. Those few self-published works that went into the black without any help at all from commercial publishers—perhaps the most notable example is Barbara Garson's 1967 play *MacBird*—were clearly flukes. Henderson certainly hadn't gotten anything from his own self-publishing experience except a huge debt, a handful of reviews (mostly in the back pages of backwater papers), and

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skimpy sales. Nonetheless, Henderson's *Handbook* trumpets self-publishing as *the* thing to do when "the moneymakers" (commercial publishers) turn you down.

Indeed, Henderson implies that self-publishing is a more honest, clean, and noble way of getting into print than signing a contract with . . . *them.* When, in the course of an interview with Henderson, Barbara Garson mentions the possibility of having her next book published by Doubleday, Henderson replies (one can almost hear him gasp): "Do I hear you right? You would actually consider another publisher-published book?" Garson (obviously feeling a sudden stab of guilt) rejoins, "Well, to be honest, yes." Henderson can't believe it: "Why, after all the good things that happened with *MacBird* and your less than pleasant experience with *All the Livelong Day* [published by Doubleday]?" Garson's answer is that, unlike *All the Livelong Day,* "*MacBird* was the product of a movement . . . ."

And at that word, *movement,* one can imagine Henderson calming down. Smiling, nodding. For the *Handbook* takes exactly that approach to self-publishing: it's a movement, supposedly (like Garson's *MacBird*) an outgrowth of the Sixties counterculture movement. It's idealistic. Selfless. Far from being a desperate, futile, time-wasting, money-wasting course to which a pathetically egoistic author is driven against his better judgment, it's a noble political action—a heroic act of defiance against the profit-mad conglomerates that run publishing in America. The self-publisher is the heir of Walt Whitman, the comrade-in-arms of the Russian *samizdat* publishers (and *The Publish-It-Yourself Handbook* is dedicated immodestly to both). For a self-publishing writer to pack up his presses and move on to a commercial publisher is to sell out to the bitch goddess.

Despite all this anti-Publishers' Row rhetoric, however, Henderson tried the manuscript of the *Handbook* out on several commercial publishers—only to be universally rejected—before deciding to publish it himself. The name of the house this time was Pushcart Press. Again Henderson became his own salesman and shipping clerk. And this time it paid off: *The Publish-It-Yourself Handbook* was an immediate success. Finally Henderson had the attention he had craved. Reviewers (many of whom, as Henderson has noted, are themselves rejected novelists) were intrigued by the book, and gave it extensive—and quite favorable—publicity; and the orders poured in. Nearly everyone, it seems, who had ever written an "unconventional" novel like *The Galapagos Kid* and who had, like Henderson, made the rounds of the publishers without any luck, wanted the book. Sales of the *Handbook* were as fast as sales of *The Galapagos Kid* had been slow; so it was that Henderson learned an important fact of life: "Many authors, while quite willing to buy a book about how to publish their own stuff, are far too reluctant to buy the works of other authors." The explanation, of course, is that the sort of "writer" who buys a book called *The Publish-It-Yourself Handbook* is likely to be a lot more serious about fame, fortune, immortality, and literary stallionship than about literature. And this, of course, was the big secret of Henderson's ultimate success—he knew how desperately, childishly, selfishly ambitious so many unpublished self-styled "writers" are. He had been there himself. The way he finally realized his dreams was by capitalizing on *their* dreams.

In 1978, the Pushcart Press published a book that might be fairly described as a companion volume to *The Publish-It-Yourself Handbook.* Like the *Handbook, The Little Magazine in America: A Modern Documentary History,* edited by Elliott Anderson and Mary Kinzie, is mostly a collection of how-I-did-it stories—in this case, by people who founded and edited their own literary magazines. Though published in association with *TriQuarterly, The Little Magazine in America* takes a distinctly Hendersonian line; the attitude toward magazine publishing that runs through the majority of its forty-two chapters is identical to Henderson's every-angry-young-man-his-own-publisher attitude

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toward book publishing. In the first chapter of *The Little Magazine in America,* "Of Living Belfry and Rampart: On American Literary Magazines Since 1950," Michael Anania describes the different types of literary magazines that have been published in the United States in the past few decades. As he sees it, the field is divided up into

> university-based reviews with eclectic interest; quarterlies with distinct critical frameworks; independent eclectic magazines that have invariably served the centric literature nobly and well . . . ; and adversary magazines, those quicksilver enterprises that hold much of the romance of the little magazines in their invariable insistence that everybody in print is wrong about nearly everything literary and cultural except the few people published in their thirty-two saddle-stitched, untrimmed pages.

The emphasis in *The Little Magazine in America* is clearly on (and the sympathy clearly with) the latter sort of venture—the saddle-stitched, untrimmed "adversary magazines." After devoting the requisite chapters to *Poetry* and to the *Kenyon, Partisan,* and *Southern* reviews, *The Little Magazine in America* settles down, kicks off its shoes, and for the next several hundred pages offers us the histories of (among others) *Neon, Kulchur, Yugen, Trobar, Dust, Caterpillar, Io, Blue Suede Shoes,* and *Big Sky.* Like Henderson's "On Pushcart Press" (which appears on page 614 of the book), most of these chapters are stirring first-person tales of selfless, unstinting, Herculean labor in the service of—well, supposedly in the service of literature, although, strangely enough, the editor-chroniclers often talk about themselves a good deal more than they do about the material they published in their magazines. Keith Abbott's essay on *Blue Suede Shoes* is so illustrative of the type of unabashed solipsism that clogs so much of this book that the temptation to quote from it at length is hard to resist. Here is a taste of Abbott—and remember that this is in a reference book about American literary history:

> Because I had received a huge grant for *BSS* from CCLM [the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines], I planned to produce two novels as *BSS: Gush* by myself and *The California Papers* by Steve Carey. But what to do while I waited for them to be done? Easy. I began the Decimal Series, taking *BSS* backward in time. The few libraries I had as subscribers became upset.
>
> But then *BSS* had a history of library problems. Opal L. Nations and I switched issues once. He did number 11 of *BSS* and I did number 9 of his magazine, *Strange Faeces.* This created a wonderful amount of confusion among our library subscribers. But the Decimal Series was the last straw for some of my libraries. It was reported to me that at one library they refused to recognize my Decimal Series and were hand lettering each issue as it came in: No. 16, No. 17, etc. [Oh, those philistines!]
>
> I lost another library because they became hysterical when the .3141596265 issue came out; the number was too big to put on their index cards. (Alert readers will notice that this is the number for *pi,* only the decimal point has been placed incorrectly. This did not deter me, though, from calling it the *Pi* issue.)
>
> . . . The Decimal Series, besides providing a way out of the *Gush* problem, was an attempt to revive what I felt to be a flagging focus . . . . I knew that I had to use as much reason as possible in order to smooth over the transition to the Decimal Series, so I tried to use *famous* decimals, such as Ted Williams' batting average, .406, the last time anyone hit over .400 in the major leagues, and Rogers Hornsby's equally celebrated .424, the highest batting average ever recorded . . . .

The word *self-indulgent* seems ridiculously tame in such a case. Not once in his entire essay does Abbott say anything interesting about the work that appeared in *Blue Suede Shoes. That* seems to be incidental. He does name some of the writers whose work he published, and he makes a few general statements about the nature of their contributions ("One genre interested me: the prose poem"), but one really gets no sense at all,

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from Abbott's essay, of what sort of things one might have read in his magazine. What Abbott seems to consider most important about *Blue Suede Shoes,* if the emphasis in his essay is any indication, is the puerile issue-numbering pranks he played on librarians—the literary equivalent of short-sheeting the governess's bed. For the Pushcart Press to present this sort of sophomoric nonsense as part of American literary history is irresponsible beyond belief.

But that's the way it goes in this book. Too many of the editor-chroniclers in *The Little Magazine in America* dwell extensively on their own beloved quirks, caprices, and pointless outrages against good taste and literary value; too many describe their disorganization as if it were something to be admired; and too many devote too little space to questions of substance. Henderson and his editors appear to feel that the shoddier the product, and the more frivolous and egocentric the approach, the more virtuous the magazine. Throughout *The Little Magazine in America,* such solid, enduring literary magazines as *The Hudson Review* and *Poetry* are raked over the coals by one editor-chronicler after another—*Hudson* for being intolerably "highbrow" and "snobbish," *Poetry* for being too "pure," too "homogenized, antiseptic, democratic and dreary." Hardly anybody in these pages has a bad word, however, for such amateurish monuments to conceit as *Blue Suede Shoes.*

The central idea of *The Little Magazine in America,* indeed, seems to be that there's something noble and brave—something *politically virtuous*—about being one of these unconventional, Keith Abbott-type editors. They describe themselves and each other as if they were freedom fighters. Example: Jonathan Baumbach's contribution to the book, titled "Who Do They Think They Are? A Personal History of the Fiction Collective." The title communicates the main point of the piece: that the great thing about the Fiction Collective is not the quality of its product, but its awesome willingness to stand up to the "devils of greed" (yet another synonym for the commercial publishers) by putting out its own books.[2]

Given Henderson's rhetoric about the avarice of commercial publishers, his purported admiration for the nobility of the writers and editors who turn their backs on Publishers' Row, and (most important of all) his own keen desire for a permanent niche in the New York literary establishment, it was only a matter of time before the *Pushcart Prize* series was born. "In order to give some sort of recognition to the more outstanding authors encouraged by the *Handbook* and by today's small press movement," Bill Henderson has written, "in 1975 I asked several distinguished editors to help me start an annual prize anthology: the Pushcart Prize series." One is meant to get the distinct impression that the *Pushcart Prize* exists largely for the purpose of reprinting work published originally by small presses—in particular, by the writers' own presses. Such, at any rate, is the image Henderson covets for the Pushcart Press: that of a homely-but-heroic one-man operation, reaching out to help other homely-but-heroic one-man operations. The dustjacket of *The Pushcart Prize, VIII* carries the following blurb:

> In 1973 Pushcart Press was started with a minuscule budget and a single book dedicated to the writer's spirit of independence—*The Pub-*

2 It must be mentioned that the editors of *The Little Magazine in America* let a Trojan horse into the gates in the form of Gene Lyons, whose "Report on the Fiction Collective" dares to question the "fearless innovator" pose of Baumbach and his fellow Collectivists. A number of Lyons's observations would apply as well to other enterprises whose histories are chronicled in the book. For example: "A large part of the Fiction Collective's case against commercial publishers in fact rests upon [the publishers'] alleged hostility to, or incomprehension of, what is 'new,' or 'innovative,' or 'experimental.' In the organization's lexicon all of those words are good ones, as 'traditional' and 'commercial' are bad." Lyons's wit, intelligence, and critical standards put most of the editor-chroniclers in the book to shame.

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lish it Yourself Handbook, edited by Bill Henderson. That title, typeset on an IBM selectric typewriter and decorated with homemade graphics in Letra-set press-on type, was so successful that Pushcart was able to undertake the first edition of *The Pushcart Prize* a few years later with the help of our founding editors.

From the revolutionary rhetoric about the "writer's spirit of independence" to the boastful references to the "minuscule budget," the improvised typesetting, and the "homemade graphics," this passage is an ideal example of Pushcart publicity. The emphasis is not on the literary quality of the book's contents (although that is certainly trumpeted loudly enough) but—as in so many of the essays in *The Little Magazine in America*—on the spunky, grassroots rebellion against the tyranny of mainstream publishing that the book purports to represent. The front matter of *The Pushcart Prize, VIII,* in fact, reminds us that the name of the Pushcart Press derives from Project Pushcart, George Plimpton's "independent bookselling march" down Fifth Avenue in 1973. One can admire and respect Plimpton and still find the political and military overtones of the word "march" (The Long March? The March on Washington?) a little ludicrous when Henderson applies it to a bunch of well-to-do New York bookmen parading their wares past Bonwit Teller, Saks, and the Sherry Netherland. The same goes for his use of the expression "small press movement": the phrase conjures up a picture of some sort of small-press *Solidarnosc,* with Henderson as Lech Walesa. And that's just a bit much.

One might be able to respect all this hyperbolic rhetoric if it were sincere—if Henderson really seemed to believe that the *Pushcart Prize* is doing for neglected small-press writers what medieval knights did for damsels in distress. But it's not. A cursory glance inside the covers of the last edition belies the book's image. The contents of *The Pushcart Prize, VIII*—which is in every way typical of its predecessors—bear astonishingly little resemblance to what one has been led to expect by Henderson's description of it as a place where fine writing is "rescue[d] from oblivion." Simply to list the names of some of the authors represented in the collection is to give a sense of what sort of book we are dealing with: Robert Bly, Andrei Codrescu, Cynthia Ozick, W. D. Snodgrass, Stanley Plumly, Richard Wilbur, Joyce Carol Oates, Raymond Carver, Amy Clampitt, Richard Howard, Philip Booth, Wayne C. Booth, William Dickey, Gordon Lish, Maxine Kumin, Lincoln Kirstein, Richard Hugo, Mary Oliver, Alan Dugan, Bobbie Ann Mason, Thomas McGrath, Ann Stanford...

This is rescuing from oblivion? What's the gag? Yes, there is a handful of token unknowns here, and their work is certainly not among the worst. But going systematically through the table of contents of *The Pushcart Prize, VIII,* one finds the great majority of the fifty-six names to be familiar ones. Either they are famous writers who have been winning National Book Awards and Pulitzers and Guggenheims for decades, or they are among the handful of hot young writers whose names are all over the place these days, who have won some minor awards and who have their feet firmly planted on the road to the major ones. Of the hundreds—thousands?—of people writing for the small presses and little magazines, these are exactly the ones who do *not* need a *Pushcart Prize* anthology to keep their work from passing into nothingness.

Indeed, after a look at the table of contents, one might suppose that, far from being intended as a rescue mission for worthy small-press publications threatened with eternal obscurity, the *Pushcart Prize* anthology was designed as a sort of academy of the highly celebrated. That most of the stories, poems, and essays in the 1983-84 book will, within the next few years, certainly be published, as a matter of course, in collections of their authors' works issued by major commercial publishing houses, makes the *Pushcart Prize* series a rather redundant act. Not to mention a hypocritical one. Gail Godwin, in her introduction to *The Pushcart Prize, VIII,* condemns commercial maga-

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zines for their notion of "targeting," of homing in on a specific demographic segment of the public by means of a pragmatic selection of material. Small presses don't do that, she says. They're free of crass commercial considerations. Art is their only criterion. But the contents of *The Pushcart Prize, VIII* are just as pragmatically selected as anything in *McCall's* or *Redbook*.

A close examination of the contents, in fact, reveals a bias not only in favor of name writers, but in favor of certain types of writing. It cannot be a coincidence, for example, that with so many interesting and diverse subjects being written about in the United States these days, five of the eight essays in *The Pushcart Prize, VIII* are somber considerations of profound theoretical questions about the experience of literature. Granted, the experience of literature is a fascinating topic. But there is such a thing as editorial balance; and there are wonderful essayists around who do not go near such topics. This is not to suggest that these five essays are not worth a look. Take them for all in all, they are probably the most interesting things in the book. The briefest of the five is Cynthia Ozick's "What Literature Means" (from *Partisan Review*), in which she reminds us that "literature is the recognition of the particular . . . . Literature is for the sake of humanity." Such truths may seem self-evident, but it is best to repeat them every now and then. Particularly when there are critics like Thomas LeClair going around writing pieces like "Avant-Garde Mastery" *(TriQuarterly),* a tribute to the use of systems theory as a structural foundation in the novels of John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Don DeLillo, and others. An excerpt:

> The avant-garde of mastery is summarized by Barth's *Letters,* a system of systems that is and is about reconstruction, or what Barth has named "replenishment": the remaking from alphabetical letters a language both artful and referential, the remaking of mind through the information and reciprocity of mailed letters, the remaking of the book from "exhausted" forms in belles lettres. Barth's definition of plot—"the incremental perturbation of an unstable homeostatic system and its catastrophic restoration to a complexified equilibrium"—suggests in a sentence the pervasive presence of systems theory in the book, especially in its formative principles. As an epistolary novel, *Letters* accepts print as its medium and takes full advantage of two meanings of "correspondence," making it refer both to the processes of communication exchange and to the homologous relations with reality emphasized in systems theory. As a sequel to Barth's first six books, the novel recycles their disparate materials into an ecological whole, a large, collaborative, literally open system in which entropy is everywhere mentioned and everywhere combatted by the negentropic patterns of order and growth Barth formulates.

Most of these essays are in fact better than this. It's just a shame that the editorial bias is so clearly in favor of the well-known writer who pontificates solemnly about an imposing theme, and against familiar essays, social and political homilies of relatively modest scope, and even literary pieces about specific works or writers.

The fiction in *The Pushcart Prize, VIII* is as homogenous as the essays, and to far drearier effect. The fiction writer who wants to get into one of the *Pushcart Prize* books is hereby advised to make his characters and their actions as uninteresting as possible; to write a cold, clipped, noncommittal prose that makes Mickey Spillane look like Francine du Plessix Gray; and to fill his sentences with the names of fast-food outlets, television shows, celebrities, and the brand name of every household product he can think of. The theme that emerges from all this, of course, should be that the faceless, heartless, consumer-oriented American is so enthralled by the phony world of TV shows and the fantastic promises of TV commercials that he is a stranger to genuine emotions and sensible values, and moves through his banal life like a robot. The plot should turn on the protagonist's confrontation with the fact of human mortality and his

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consequent temporary awakening from this spiritless, robotlike stupor—an awakening which only serves, of course, to emphasize the essential deadness of his soul. One would think that six stories of this sort in the world would be at least five more than necessary, but apparently the marketplace is still hungry for them, and the writers who produce them are quite celebrated for it. Indeed, as Bill Henderson's own career demonstrates, one of the fastest ways to break into the literary establishment is to embrace a trendy anti-establishment ethos.

As for the poet who wants to make it into the Pushcart pantheon, here are a few tips: write poems about words; write poems that consist of numbered lists; write poems about works of art or your mother's body. Your style should be so prosy, flat, and torpid that when you put a word in italics in the middle of the sixth line, the relative excitement of the event should make your reader bolt out of his seat. (There is, of course, the Amy Clampitt option of making every poem impenetrably baroque, but remember that *there is no middle ground:* aim either for the painfully plain or the ridiculously rococo.) But don't hold your breath, writers: unless you've got a name, your chances of getting into the *Pushcart Prize* series are slim indeed.

In fact, it's not only the cachet of *your* name that matters when Pushcart Prize-picking time comes around; it's the cachet of the venue in which your work was originally published. Or, at least, so it seems: for the presses represented in *The Pushcart Prize, VIII* are hardly the sort that Pushcart's publicity would lead one to expect. Henderson's goal in founding the Pushcart Press was purportedly to disseminate some of the fine work published by small presses, and (in particular) the best work of worthy self-publishers; but no self-publishers appear to be represented in the 1983-84 edition at all, and only three items in the book originate from small presses (as distinguished from magazines). Those presses are the Copper Canyon Press, Blackwells Press, and Micah Publications. Everything else in the 1983-84 edition comes from magazines: four items apiece from *Poetry, Ploughshares,* and *The Iowa Review*; three apiece from the *Paris* and *Kenyon* reviews; two apiece from *Antaeus, Ironweed, Tri-Quarterly,* and the *Mississippi, Georgia, Hudson,* and *Threepenny* reviews; and one apiece from *Conjunctions, Daedalus, Raritan, Salmagundi, Chelsea, Cutbank, Grand Street, MSS, Kayak, Crazyhorse, Open Places, Frontiers, Ascent,* and the *Partisan, Ohio, Northwest, Missouri, Bellingham, Agni, Seattle,* and *American Poetry* reviews. Yes, exactly the sort of solid, enduring magazines, for the most part, that are ignored or insulted in *The Little Magazine in America.* One could hardly suggest that reprinting a story or poem or essay from any of these magazines in *The Pushcart Prize, VIII* represents a "rescue . . . from oblivion." The *Pushcart Prize* is simply not so much better known, or better distributed, than any of these magazines, that its publisher can make such a claim convincingly. Indeed, so well established are some of these magazines that their editors are among the "distinguished editors" whose help Henderson enlisted in launching the *Pushcart Prize* in the first place, and who to this day are—along with eleven of the writers included in *The Pushcart Prize, VIII*—on the series' board of editors.

What one is left with, then, after examining the *Pushcart Prize* story, is a rather Bosch-like series of mental images. One pictures Bill Henderson, for example, standing in the bow of a lifeboat shouting encouragement while a boatload of distinguished editors reach into the churning sea to rescue . . . *themselves.* One imagines Henderson leading an army, composed of the crème de la crème of establishment writers and editors, in a frontal attack on . . . the crème de la crème of establishment writers and editors. Honestly, the man has done something remarkable. For nearly a decade he has published an annual anthology which, though almost claustrophobically entrenched in the literary establishment, is nonetheless shrilly and self-righteously dedicated to the principle that the literary establishment is corrupt and corrupting, and that the writer who

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wishes to be true to his art had best shun its shabby corridors. That this series of books —filled with the already overexposed works of the literary establishment's most overpraised writers—does not represent a sincere counterculture movement on behalf of writers left out in the cold by commercial publishers, but exists, rather, to serve the ambitions of the publisher, is embarrassingly obvious. The *Pushcart Prize* series has manifestly given Bill Henderson nearly everything he always wanted: a permanent seat on the lap of the "bitch goddess"; well-forged connections with every grubby, greedy "moneymaker" on Publishers' Row; and a respected position among the Oateses and Carvers and Plimptons. He has, in short, fulfilled his boyhood dream—he has promulgated a great fiction, and the literary world has given him its rewards.

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Edgar Wind as man and thinker

by Creighton Gilbert

Edgar Wind (1900-1971) became a celebrity of sorts at the age of sixty, with a series of BBC talks called "Art and Anarchy." The book that followed was eventually translated into six languages, and individual talks even appeared in *L'Oeil* and *The Saturday Evening Post.* Wind never enjoyed the kind of fame that Kenneth Clark or Jacob Bronowski achieved with their later series; Wind's talks were on the radio, not television, and they could not convey that pleasant extension-course feeling of being helped to a big piece of culture. But they had more bite. Although too intricate to follow with ease, they did seem to present an Oxford don with a middle European accent, yet with a graceful English style, endorsing the view that modern art was decadent.

In Wind's own world of art-historical scholarship he had of course long been a presence. Rudolf Wittkower, his closest colleague in the Thirties, once said that Wind was "the one true genius of his acquaintance." Lectures were Wind's medium. The series of lectures that he gave in the Forties at colleges throughout the United States, about Raphael and Michelangelo, were recently remembered by a listener as "magic." They were never written down. Asking us to consider works of art as precipitates of religious, mythological, and intellectual forces, Wind seemed to make us see what in Renaissance culture had conditioned the art of these masters, what had made their art what it was visually. Wind was following the interdisciplinary approach to scholarship that took seed and flourished at the Warburg Institute.

Today the Warburg method is known by the tag name of iconology and Erwin Panofsky is rightly called its key exponent. But its creator was Aby Warburg, who now seems almost as much a myth as the themes he loved. With money from his family's banking fortune, he devoted himself to building a library in Hamburg, Germany, a library which even in its classification system urged that attention be paid to the interaction of segments of culture over long epochs, with special emphasis on classical antiquity and the Renaissance. By the 1920s, the Warburg Library had become a gathering place for young scholars, like Panofsky, who were affected by Warburg's intellectual outlook. The Library became in effect a research institute. In the Thirties it moved to London, where it remains today.

Over the years the Warburg Institute has generated much fresh thinking on largely overlooked connections. Frances Yates's inquiry into systems for remembering and Michael Baxandall's study of painting through the clichés of gesture and rhetoric are two recent examples. It has sometimes seemed to exist in a state of interdisciplinary balance, but at other times art historians have seemed to run it and to let other subjects simply assist. This is probably the natural result of the fact that all the people associated with the Institute belong to some

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specialty and of these only art history has been able to bring the others inside one fold. Warburg studies—such as Panofsky's studies of proportion through the ages, or of tombs, or of images of time—are hardly different from social anthropology done through material culture, except that anthropology's otherwise universal "study of man" tends to exclude man in Western history, concentrating instead on either the contemporary or the primitive. The rest has been left to Warburg and to the scholars in his tradition, like Edgar Wind.

The announcement that a book of Wind's selected essays on the Renaissance was to be published made one hope that finally his Michelangelo lectures would appear in print. But instead the volume, entitled *The Eloquence of Symbols,*[1] reprints a dozen mostly very short pieces, mainly written in the 1930s, averaging eight pages of big type. The omission of even the published studies of Michelangelo was a "necessity," the editor explains, because Wind never finished his big book on Michelangelo. The decision seems to carry homage very far, but it certainly follows Wind's wish; in the 1940s he declined to review the major Michelangelo studies by Tolnay, which would have entailed giving signals about his own views. There is to be a second volume of essays by Wind on the eighteenth century. Since his writings in this first volume add up only to some one hundred and ten pages, this too has the air of a bow to genius. But again it follows precedent: Wind's first art-history book, on Bellini, has less than sixty pages of big type, and his *Giorgione* even fewer, which cannot but make any author envious. These books are in effect lectures, just as his two larger books, *Art and Anarchy* and *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (1958), are sets of lectures.

The longest section of *The Eloquence of Symbols* is a memoir of Wind by a distinguished colleague at Oxford, Hugh Lloyd-Jones. Understandably, it is benign, glancing only occasionally at the difficult Wind whom others remember. It might be defined as the kind of memoir in which the subject's first wife is not mentioned. Among other things, it shows that Wind became identifiable as an art historian surprisingly late. Although he ended up being the first professor of art history at Oxford, where he spent his last sixteen years, much of his teaching until then had been of philosophy. Indeed, the study of philosophy played the major part in the early intellectual development of this young German—not, as the chronology of Lloyd-Jones's memoir suggests, a discipleship with Aby Warburg. In fact, Warburg was not in Hamburg during Wind's student years.

Wind's thesis, completed in 1922, compared the aesthetician's and the art historian's approaches to an object. Lloyd-Jones writes that, according to a letter Wind wrote at the end of his life, the thesis was supervised by Panofsky, but "by a private arrangement," since Panofsky himself had not yet passed the relevant academic hurdle. Ernst Cassirer, the senior professor of philosophy, also "helped supervise." So Wind was, in Lloyd-Jones's words, "Panofsky's first pupil." This interesting image does not fit other accounts, however. According to Herbert von Einem's obituary essay on Panofsky, Panofsky had passed that academic hurdle in 1920. Moreover, Panofsky's own amused account of that time tells of how, because there was no senior person in the new art-history department, he had "the unusual privilege of accepting and examining candidates for the doctorate" while he was still a *Privatdozent,* in 1921. Such supervision being authorized, Wind's description of his arrangement with Panofsky being "private" doesn't seem plausible, and prompts the thought that its not having been on the books was because Panofsky wasn't in charge: Cassirer was.

Cassirer is remembered today only by specialists. As the title of his major work of the Twenties—*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*—

1 *The Eloquence of Symbols,* by Edgar Wind; edited by Jaynie Anderson. Oxford University Press, 133 pages, $39.

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might suggest, he was a philosopher in whom Aby Warburg could happily find backing for his own concerns with the meanings of images, although the two men meant very different things by symbolism. Conversely, Cassirer resembled Warburg to the extent of exploring the application of his philosophy of symbolic representation on cultural history, especially the Renaissance and following centuries. His work obviously had some influence on Panofsky's classic "Perspective as Symbolic Form," but Panofsky's work is Warburgian while Cassirer's is not. Typically, Panofsky in these early Hamburg years collaborated with Fritz Saxl—Aby Warburg's librarian and successor, and a splendid scholar—in teaching seminars and in the writing of a book on Dürer's engraving, *Melancholy,* that traces the evolution of this psychological concept and its images through the ages.

Presumably because the inflation of the period offered no jobs, Wind left Hamburg in 1924 to live in New York with a cousin. He worked as a substitute high-school teacher for a year, a classic profile of the poor, educated immigrant. During this time he was able to publish, in American philosophy magazines, spin-offs of his thesis and a report on current German philosophy. The report is indeed a "general account" of German philosophy, as Lloyd-Jones's memoir notes, but it also contains, surprisingly, an attack on Cassirer. According to Wind, Cassirer's effort to combine the construction of a system with a view of how thought evolves in history seemed "deliberately to disregard" the inevitable "historical limitations" in his own system. It seems odd that Wind omitted here one of his favorite procedures, the resolving of apparent contradictions with witty paradox. He would later argue, for instance, in *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance,* that the same Renaissance symbolic figure signified love and death. (This in turn led to the criticism that Wind's procedure allowed him to identify the meaning of a symbol any way he wished.)

Where the criticism of Cassirer does prefigure the later Wind is in the vividness of its putdown. One sample, which can be analyzed more briefly than most, comes from his contribution to a volume honoring Panofsky, which is reprinted in *The Eloquence of Symbols.* The neo-Platonist philosopher Ficino, Wind writes, was justified in asserting his own conformity with Plato on a particular point; Ficino "did not indulge, as has been claimed, in empty declamation." Wind duly attaches a footnote purporting to document this charge of emptiness, but the quotation only shows a scholar saying that Ficino's assertion was "in alleged reference to Plato." Wind obviously had no wish to misrepresent the other scholar; he included a direct quotation, after all. So when he turned the man's cautious "alleged" into an accusation by the scholar that Ficino was a fraud, he evidently thought the passage had been meant to convey that notion by hinting, and that his readers would agree. Apparently, such slight evidence was, for Wind, sufficient. It should be pointed out that Wind's own argument here, that Ficino conforms to a text in Plato, is shaky, and the tough treatment of another opinion undergirds it. Indeed, exasperated complaints about Wind's method from less scintillating professors appeared in reviews throughout his career, and Wind's mocking replies play an unusually large part in his bibliography.

In 1925 Wind left his substitute teaching in high schools to accept one of two postdoctoral fellowships in philosophy that were available at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The fellowships existed because a family of rich alumni, who in 1927 also gave the university a football stadium, had fallen under the spell of North Carolina's legendary philosophy teacher, Horace Williams. Williams constantly invoked Hegel and the *Begriff,* but was really a cracker-barrel spellbinder. He appears as Virgil Weldon in Thomas Wolfe's *Of Time and the River.* (Wolfe was in the class of 1920.) Wind also taught philosophy, as one of two instructors. The other instructor was the remarkable Paul Green, class of 1921, whose main energies were already directed toward playwriting. In 1927, at the age of

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thirty, Green won a Pulitzer Prize for his tragedy of black farm life, *In Abraham's Bosom,* and in 1931 another of his plays, *The House of Connelly,* was the Group Theatre's first production. He and Wolfe were the two star pupils of another Chapel Hill professor, who counseled aspiring writers to tell of their own regions. The other post-doctoral fellow was Katherine Gilbert, my mother, whose book on modern aesthetic theorists appeared in 1927. Green and Wind were the two people she asked to read the book in manuscript. The Wind-Gilbert contact continued for some fifteen years, while Wind was in Hamburg, London, and New York.

The early American years also saw Wind's brief first marriage. But in 1928, Wind was able to return to Hamburg and get on a proper career ladder. While working as an unpaid *Privatdozent* in philosophy at the university, he earned money arranging philosophy books at the Warburg Library and attending to various bibliographic projects. He now got to know Aby Warburg, in his last days, and certainly felt his powerful influence. When a congress on aesthetics held its annual meeting in Hamburg, Wind gave a talk—reprinted in the present volume—explaining how the Library worked. He exalted Aby Warburg by contrasting his method—studying meanings and seeing how "contradictions are reconciled"—with that of art historians like Wölfflin and Riegl, who emphasized style and who "declined to deal with major questions." This view is in sharp contrast to that of Panofsky, who once told a colleague that his own work was in the traditions of both Warburg and Riegl, and a little of Wölfflin too.

But most of Wind's intellectual energy would seem to have gone into his nonpaying post in the philosophy department, which Cassirer still headed. Wind's inaugural lecture on Plato's idea of art was followed by a short book typical of German academic philosophizing, a variation of Kant's explanation of knowledge. At this time Wind also wrote his first art-history article, on Gainsborough and Reynolds, in which he argued that the philosophers of the eighteenth century—Hume, for example—were the key to understanding the work of these painters. The Warburg bulletin published the essay, although it was still far from a typical Warburgian theme. Indeed, the article is closer to the work of Cassirer, who often branched out from his base in philosophy to cultural history, and even wrote on English philosophy.

All of this was cut off by Hitler. The saga of the Library's flight to London is told here by Lloyd-Jones entirely in terms of Wind's efforts, which are certainly worth recalling: the standard account of the move, written by Warburg's nephew, gives all the credit to Saxl and has nothing to say of Wind's role. In London, Wind became deputy director of the Warburg Institute, which was only logical, since Saxl and he were the only men who had come over from Hamburg. Panofsky and others had scattered to different places, while the Institute's new members, like Wittkower and E. H. Gombrich, now arrived from elsewhere.

In 1937, Wittkower and Wind started the Warburg journal, which brilliantly made Warburg's kind of scholarship known to English-speaking students. In the journal, the Library's resources and Wind's brilliance in English fused with dazzling results. Even today, some of Wind's contributions of a page or two—several of which are reprinted in *The Eloquence of Symbols*—remain valid and memorable.

Around this time, the American dancer Agnes De Mille was in London, a little-known avant-garde figure. When she first met Wind, in 1933, she had found him impressive, but they had no further contact for more than a year. Then, after two of her concerts in London, great bouquets came to her with an "ardent and disturbing" card, and Wind's name. He arranged to be free for three days. "A man of position, of stature, of achievement, was courting me," she later wrote in her memoirs, *Speak to Me, Dance with Me.* "I was infatuated." "His kiss held peace and promise." She had to leave on a trip to America; in his letters to her there, "he said he truly loved me," but she was

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disquieted: "I'd seen him four times." When she returned, Wind met her at the boat and took her in his arms: "it was magic with happiness." "Two days later I received a letter from him stating that he had thought it all over carefully and that he could never see me again. No explanation." When she did see him, he told her of another woman whom he didn't love but to whom he had obligations. Another time he said that he was having a breakdown. There were a few stolen meetings, but then Wind "shut all the doors." De Mille "went down as though poleaxed."

She could not have known of the belief Wind expressed in his inaugural lecture in Hamburg. There he attempts to answer the puzzle of why Plato banished art from the state. Art in Greece was not simply a pleasant background decoration, Wind argued, but something with magic powers that could destroy the logic and morality of society. Modern man, he went on to say, has lost Plato's understanding. Thus, we should renounce art, but not without some experience of it; when young, we should practice especially "poetical expression and dance movements," in order to know what to fear and where to draw the line. Significantly, Wind had been drawn to De Mille because she was a dancer. When she worried whether he really loved her, he answered: "Yes I do. I've seen your work. I know you. You have genius and I love you." So when he cut her off, he was being true to his theory and to his belief that art is not separate from life.

Coming to America to lecture in 1939, Wind was preceded by the excitement his magazine and articles had aroused. He was invited to speak at colleges everywhere and even to give six lectures at the Museum of Modern Art, certainly the only historian of older art to do so. These lectures fall between the essay on Plato and the later BBC series. They deplore art's departure from the central place it once had in human concerns, especially in ritual, and they cite Picasso's *Crucifixion* as an example of the failure of modern efforts to get back to the traditional center. When Wind lectured at the Morgan Library soon after, on Michelangelo, the Surrealist painter Tchelitchew came, brought by Agnes Rindge Claflin, the Vassar professor of modern art history. Clearly, Wind was in fashion. But some people had their doubts. After one of these talks, Meyer Schapiro gave a spontaneous counter-lecture, complete with bibliography, in a nearby coffee shop. Others asked whether what Wind said could be relied upon.

The war naturally kept Wind in America. After just two years as an adjunct professor at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts, he transferred to the University of Chicago. A "permanent appointment" was better, as Lloyd-Jones reasonably says, but this is hardly explanation enough. The NYU Institute at that time was the art historian's Mecca, and if Wind left by preference he was unique. At Chicago, it turned out, he was "not happy," and in two more years he accepted an invitation from the president of Smith College to occupy its best appointment, the one-year Neilson Professorship. When the president of Smith renewed the appointment for three more years, some very distinguished permanent faculty grumbled. Among other things, Wind had light duties and a salary far above their maximum. Eventually, he dropped down to the rank of professor and was given only half a slot in the art department, the other half of his responsibilities being in philosophy.

There were other disappointments. He produced his first art-history book, the little book on Bellini, but it was generally not well received. Wind wrote a rebuttal to his critics in *The Art Bulletin* longer than most of his own pieces, with elegantly sharp rhetoric. He did the same two years later to defend his ideas on Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel. In 1951, in a form for *Who's Who,* he reported that a book on myth would appear that year, by him and the distinguished scholar Douglas Bush, but it never did. Perhaps most important, his relationship with the Warburg Institute, which had officially continued through these years, now ended, after a "week of talks" with Saxl. Wind's doubts about Saxl's scholarly projects, mentioned

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by Lloyd-Jones in his memoir essay, are surely an insufficient explanation for Wind's resignation. It is hard to imagine that he did not dream of being a principal member at the Institute. It was thus no doubt a wonderful change, if not a vindication, when Oxford invited Wind to start its art-history department. He ended up producing three books during his sixteen years there, as against only one during the preceding twenty.

Just before Wind died, his thoughts returned to Aby Warburg, in a book review for *The Times Literary Supplement*. The book under review was a biography of Warburg by E. H. Gombrich, the director of the Warburg Institute and the man who had to an extent succeeded Panofsky as the quintessential Warburgian. Wind's piece is filled with strictures about the "depressing tone" of Gombrich's book, with its "pullulating swarm" of notes, all of which falsify the image of Warburg and present him as a "tormented mollusc." The piece was greeted with astonishment, and, for once, did not persuade; Gombrich's book was in fact praised on virtually all sides. Wind's criticisms did not seem substantive, and the different image of Warburg he offered did not seem right. Warburg's lectures used to go on for hours, but Wind calls his style "compact," "economical," "aphoristic," "astringent." This sounds much more like an ideal picture of Wind's own style and reinforces one's feeling that the review is really a final cry to be recognized as Warburg's rightful heir, rather than the intruder Gombrich.

Wind never got that recognition. He is known for his combination of abstruse erudition and scintillating talk, but the big Michelangelo book he was already preparing thirty years before his death was never done. It does not seem likely that Wind feared his critics, or let the hope of finding one more source impede his writing—the usual reasons for a scholar's sterility. Possibly a long, sustained work was not in him. What makes Wind extraordinary is that he so richly articulated the achievement he desired, making its manqué status uniquely glaring. It was a classic, even a heroic, tragedy—scholar division.

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Poems *by Donald Justice, Jane Kenyon, Donald Petersen, & Peter Porter*

Children walking home from school through good neighborhood

They are like figures held in some glass ball,
One of those in which, when shaken, snowstorms occur;
But this one is not yet shaken.
And they go unaccompanied still,
Out along this walkway between two worlds,
This almost swaying bridge.
October sunlight checkers their path;
It frets their cheeks and bare arms now with a shadow
Almost too pure to signify itself.
And they progress slowly, somewhat lingeringly,
Independent, yet moving all together,
Like polyphonic voices that crisscross
In short-lived harmonies.

Today, a few stragglers.
One, a girl, stands there with hands spaced out, so,
A gesture in a story. Someone's school notebook spills,
And they bend down to gather up the loose pages.
(Bright sweaters knotted at the waist; solemn expressions.)
Not that they shrink or hold back from what may come,
For now they all at once run to meet it, a little swirl of colors,
Like the leaves already blazing and falling farther north.

—*Donald Justice*

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The painters

A hot dry day in early fall . . .
The men have cut the vines
from the shutters, and scraped
the clapboards clean, and now
their heads appear all day
in all the windows . . .
their arms or shirtless torsos,
or a rainbow-speckled rag
swinging from a belt.

They work in earnest—
these are the last warm days.
Flies bump and buzz
between the screens and panes,
torpid from last night's frost:
the brittle months advance . . .
ruts frozen in the icy drive,
and the deeply black and soundless
nights. But now the painters

lean out from their ladders, squint
against the light, and lay on
the thick white paint.
From the lawn their radio predicts rain,
then cold Canadian air . . . .
One of them works way up
on the dormer peak,
where a few wasps levitate
near the vestige of a nest.

—*Jane Kenyon*

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Early and late

We struggled in the lines and stood with them all,
Twenty-five years and more. Here let us pause.

Some of their numbers faltered, some of them fell
Out, though we pulled for them all about equally.

Some of them struck their blows in service of truth,
Doing their duty, some were diseased with affection.

Were you about to say, "What troubles were these—
Things never seemed so heavy, not in this world"?

Turn, friend, to an older book and be reminded,
Not of Bruce and the spider that tried and tried,

But the finished web, looking deceptively easy—
Not of the men who died for the freedom to speak

As their fathers had, but the new meanings wound
In the accustomed devices, the roses intertwined.

—Donald Petersen

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Does a rake go to a brothel to sing?
(In memory of the creators of "The Rake's Progress")

We have been deceived by our idealists—
Tom Rakewell acts the audible
and not the consequent: for something to be real
it must be possible to sing it.

And we can sing the starting of the world,
a balancing of love, the games of touching teeth,
the desert dreams of conquerors,
yet wake beside the innocentest teacher
in real time, kept shadowless
beneath the cuckoo clock's retard.

Dreams are the grandest operas,
unruined by a Gounod or a Meyerbeer.
They cannot be cured with meaning
but must sing through the very tones of happening.
O tell our father we are blood and soul for him,
we are plainly set in place
as blades of grass, and should we die for love
it will be love of syntax. Who are these
punk phantoms of Pontormo? Who sits fat
in Heaven, looking lovable?

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Judgement is all Creation sings.
Here we go back to finding crimes
to match the punishment. Our needs
are music, water, persiflage,
a set of values like a colour card.
No wonder then our rulers subsidise
this art you are expected to dress up for.

To dress for dreams is dressing up forever.
Mother Goose has loosed her stays
and let her hair in delta flood
a veteran champaign. It is too late always
if you're lucky. A Major sounds within the ranks.
"Sweet dreams my Master. Dreams may lie,
But dream. For when you wake you die."

—*Peter Porter*

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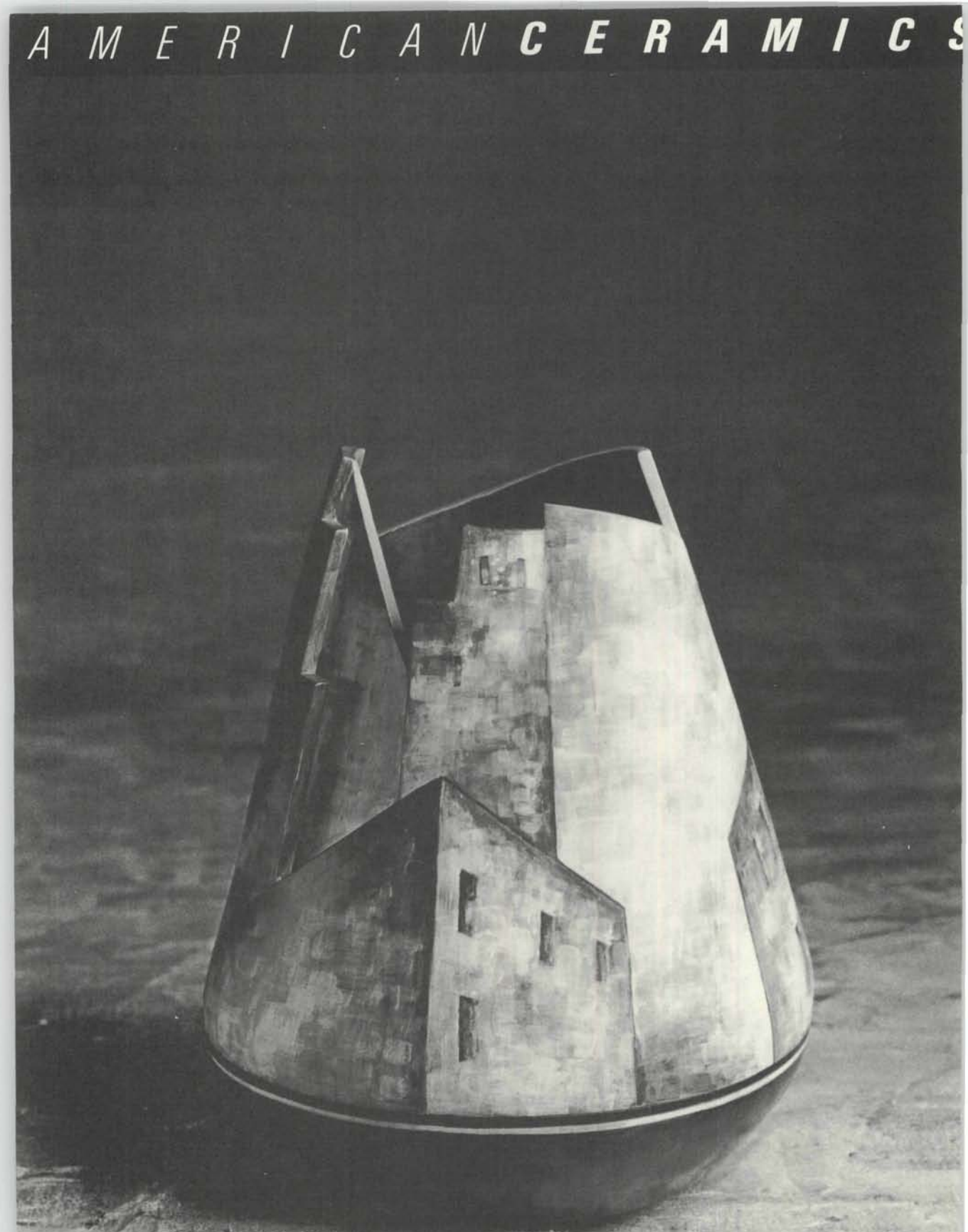

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Untitled (1983) by Linda Bacon, 14" (35cm) high. Photo: Brad Guice.

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Architecture

The Renaissance in New York: the buildings of McKim, Mead & White

by William H. Jordy

There is a particular fascination and nostalgia today for the metropolis at the turn of the century, and for its architecture. It has recently called forth a series of books, *The Sacred Spring: The Arts in Vienna 1898-1918, Paris 1900, London 1900,* and, most recently, *New York 1900.*[1] The leading architectural firm in New York at the time, McKim, Mead & White, is moreover the subject of two recent books.

What accounts for this interest in the turn-of-the-century metropolis? It surely owes something to the fact that we feel 1900 to mark the start of what the largest twentieth-century cities have become. By 1900 the hiving of populations in the major cities had reached a critical mass that initiated the urban conditions we know today. By 1900, too, the technology, society, and culture of the nineteenth century had developed the urban qualities and relationships that distinguish the modern metropolis.

But another aspect of the greatest cities of 1900 attracts us as well. At the beginning of *New York 1900,* its authors—Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and John Massengale—cite the British architectural historian Andrew Saint observing that it is the "variety and completeness" of the greatest cities as they then existed that draws us to them. The variety of our cities has, in fact, increased during the twentieth century. But their completeness, sadly, has diminished. It could indeed be the completeness of the metropolises of 1900 that most attracts us.

That sense of completeness depended, first, on the spatial limits of the metropolis around 1900, a time before the disruptive effects of the automobile, when trolleys and trains travelled fixed routes to hub destinations. The completeness owed much, too, to the fact that a greater proportion of the wealthy and upper-middle classes lived in the city. As a result, they felt an immediate civic pride. The plight of the less privileged classes in the urban hierarchy—from the middle classes down to the "deserving" poor and further down to the "shiftless" poor—was beginning to be an object of public concern, but the promise of reform reinforced the happy perception of those on top of the rough justice of the existing social order. Completeness also seemed to emanate from the panache of expertise, specialization, and prestige that manifested itself in the civic and professional organizations of the time, organizations that desired grandiloquent buildings, partly for practical purposes, partly too for self-congratulation. In Europe such buildings had been mostly

1 *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism 1890-1915,* by Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and John Massengale; Rizzoli, 502 pages, $50. *The Sacred Spring: The Arts in Vienna 1898-1918,* by Nicolas Powell, was published in 1974 by the New York Graphic Society; *Paris 1900,* by Franco Borsi and Ezio Godli, was published by Rizzoli in 1977; *London 1900,* by Alastair Service, was published, in London, by Granada in 1979.

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constructed by 1900; in America they were just beginning to go up. Finally, the completeness of the turn-of-the-century metropolis derived from the city's self-confidence and optimism about itself, which was augmented by a larger sense of national imperium. Completeness did not mean stability, however. There was a keen awareness—especially in America—that the metropolis as it then existed was but the threshold of the metropolis-to-be, a larger entity that would leave substantially unaltered the balance that the metropolis of 1900 had achieved.

It is this sense of completeness that waned as metropolitan problems in the twentieth century accumulated and steadily eroded the earlier assumption that the metropolis could cope with whatever complexities the future might bring. To return to 1900 is to return to something like the idyllic moment in modern metropolitanism, especially in America.

To this nostalgia may be added the current postmodernist interest in the forms and ideals of classicism and the Renaissance, and in the classicized revivals they have spawned. These forms and ideals conditioned the architecture and urban planning for cities at the turn of the century. The postmodernist is also attracted by the urban aspirations of architecture at the time and by the importance of architectural ornament, whether classical or Art Nouveau.

In 1900 Renaissance buildings and gardened boulevards were "modern." It was only later that they came to be seen as reactionary. The well-being and self-satisfaction of the turn-of-the-century American metropolis was epitomized in notions of the "City Beautiful" and of the "American Renaissance." Culture in America—or its understudy, cultivation—had presumably attained a degree of visibility, sophistication, density, and interconnectedness that justified talk of immanent civic "beauty." Whether this beauty was already present or merely almost present was open to some question, but the immanence of some sort of "renaissance" was not. Whereas the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had represented a momentous transformation in consciousness from a theological to a humanist point of view, the would-be American Renaissance represented an episodic shift from the flaunted materialism of Victorian culture—expressive of naturalism and individualism—to a more decorous materialism attuned to idealization and corporate life. By such processes as bleaching the darkness of Victorian things, attenuating their ponderousness, simplifying their congestion, quieting their assertion, ordering their confusion, and homogenizing their idiosyncracies, the *stuff* (and stuffiness) of Victorian materialism was transmuted to a higher order of things. This cultural alchemy manifested itself primarily as a matter of taste, but it also appeared to many as the external sign of a process of cultural cleansing. That is how it was viewed by the Progressives of the time, with their concern for practical civic reform, and by the aesthetes, with their precious elitism. Both groups represented "modern" positions and both comprised part of the cultural base on which radical modernism would later build.

In *New York 1900,* however, Stern et al. discard the notions of City Beautiful and American Renaissance. They label the period from 1890 through 1915 (which is really the span of years covered by their book) as the Composite Era. More on this rubric momentarily; but it should be noted first that this volume constitutes what will be the second of three volumes recounting the history of the architecture and planning during New York's great period of metropolitanism: from 1865, when New York emerged as America's greatest city after the Civil War, through the glory decade of the 1920s, when the pinnacled skyline appeared, up to the outbreak of World War II. The Composite Era will ultimately be flanked by the Cosmopolitan Era and the Era of Convenience.

Let it be stated at the outset that the final result should be the grandest album that we have on New York architecture during this period. It is all the more consequential in that all of the more than five hundred illustrations in the present volume are period

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Richard
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photographs or renderings. If the encyclopedic range of its coverage means that some of the commentary is rushed, and the organization by building type that its overall generalizations are fragmented, on the whole it is descriptively and critically acute, with hundreds of wise observations on the cultural ideas and foibles of the period, as these are revealed in New York's buildings.

But "Composite Era"! What can this possibly mean? The phrase appears to have been snatched from an obscure contemporary journalist's awkward observation that American city dwellers were then living in a "composite" period. To Stern et al. it seems to indicate a state of amalgamating tendencies, in which disparities are apparent but in which a pervasive sense of unification also occurs. Its obvious analogy is the composite capital in classical architecture, where Ionic volutes spin out of Corinthian leafage, with evidence of the older orders persisting as distinct influences in what coheres as a new entity. According to Stern et al., the stylistic this and that of Victorian eclecticism persisted into the 1890s, but it was so transformed under a more academic appreciation of style, and so ordered by a context of civic grandeur, that it became something post-Victorian—or something "Composite."

One might complain that the disparities coming together to make the metropolis in the first place should have inclined the authors to use "Composite" for the first era of New York's post-Civil War architectural history instead of "cosmopolitan," especially since the so-called Composite Era is the more cosmopolitan of the two. And one might also wonder—in the temporal hierarchy of epoch, era, and phase—whether "phase" does not better encapsulate the scale of the events and the span of twenty-five years in which they occurred. But semantic quibbles aside, can one speak of an era dominated by anything as equivocal as "compositeness," or even employ the term to describe New York architecture and planning of the period? Imagine an era pursuing a banner with so strange a slogan as Composite when flags flaunting American Renais-

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sance and City Beautiful fluttered near at hand to stir the spirit. More important, these catchphrases of the period might more easily accommodate the authors' arguments than the arcane rubric they have chosen.

Had the authors of *New York 1900* been academics, their label might have been, if lamentable, at least understandable. But they are architects. Robert A. M. Stern is among the leading postmodern architects, and his collaborators work in his firm. In fact, *New York 1900* represents an aspect of the new mode of practicing architecture. For some time now, the architect who is also critical commentator has been the hero practitioner of the profession, extending the example of such mentors as Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright. Indeed, much of the most acute architectural criticism these days comes from practicing architects, and in the postmodernist temper of the times much of their criticism is outright history. (One can see the architectural firm of the future having its historical division hard by the drafting room, with draftsmen turned out in slack time to work at libraries, photo archives, and word processors.) To postmodernist sensibilities like those of Stern and his colleagues, compositeness may indeed seem to be an inspiring course to pursue! It would not have seemed so, however, to McKim, Mead & White, the commanding architectural firm of the period, or to such leading New York competitors as Carrère & Hastings, Trowbridge & Livingston, Delano & Aldrich, and York & Sawyer, or to Cass Gilbert, Donn Barber, and Charles Platt, to mention a few from the cast of principals in *New York 1900*. It was a desire to contribute to the American Renaissance and to the City Beautiful movement that motivated their grand designs and loosened their clients's pocketbooks.

As Stern and his colleagues point out, Edward Bellamy pictured the urban ideal of this time as vividly as any of his contemporaries in his visionary novel, *Looking Backward, 2000-1887*. Julian West, the alien wanderer in this corporate utopia, surveys the scene:

> At my feet lay a great city. Miles of broad streets, shaded by trees and lined with fine buildings, for the most part not in continuous blocks but set in larger or smaller enclosures, stretched in every direction. Every quarter contained large open squares filled with trees, among which statues glistened and fountains flashed in the late afternoon sun. Public buildings of a colossal size and an architectural grandeur unparalled in my day, raised their stately piles on every side. Surely I had never seen this city nor one comparable to it before.

Boulevards, squares, trees, fountains, statues, stately architecture, all bathed in the late afternoon glow of a Maxfield Parrish sunset—such ordered but relaxed civic grandeur characterized this dream of a metropolitan arcadia. Tradition and beauty provided the benign background for modern convenience. (The so-called Era of Convenience was already underway.) If there was an unfocused quality about both the arcadia and the convenience, the very diffuseness of the scene inflated the sense of urban harmony to mythical "Renaissance" proportions, even as it preserved "modern" overtones.

Three great urbanistic achievements of the City Beautiful movement are worth singling out. The first was the creation of the White City for the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, with its fantasy evocation in plaster and lathe of Renaissance grandeur looking onto gondolaed lagoons. The White City was a tantalizing dream realized for the summer, and its ephemeral quality made it all the more potent as a vision. The second achievement, in 1901, was the so-called McMillan Plan (named for the senator who sponsored it). It sought to revive Pierre L'Enfant's original scheme for the Mall in the nation's capital so as to rectify the higgledy-piggledy depredations of it made during the nineteenth century. The Boulevard L'Enfant envisioned running the length of the Mall was, however, converted into a garden—the urbanism of the original scheme typically arcadianized by the effects of the intervening nineteenth-century enthusiasm for parks. The new Mall was influenced partly

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by French formalism (it called for extravagant terracing around the Washington Monument, along with a reflecting pool that reached to the Lincoln Memorial) and partly by the ideal of the New England common lined with rows of elms. The third major urbanistic achievement of the City Beautiful movement was the *Plan of Chicago* by Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett. This book was sponsored by the business elite of the city's Commercial Club as a civic gesture, shortly before official planning commissions began to professionalize what had previously been Medici-like acts of noblesse oblige. No other City Beautiful plan matched Chicago's in so grandly uniting public buildings, cultural institutions, parks, and a shopping boulevard with the practicalities of a regional road, rail, and harbor transportation network. None was more influential in affecting significant change.

Afflatus, arcadia, metropolis: three stages of the City Beautiful movement. Over all of them presided the hulking power of Chicago's leading corporate architect-cum-planner, Daniel Burnham. At his side for the first two stages, and his mentor for the third, was Charles Follen McKim.

New York was more American Renaissance than City Beautiful, more McKim than Burnham. To be sure, as *New York 1900* demonstrates, a flurry of activity around the turn of the century produced various schemes, most of which featured diagonals drawn from East River bridges to such open spaces as Madison Square. At the same time various municipal art societies were born (some existing to good effect down to the present). If many of the diagonals and circumferentials drawn across Chicago's gridiron were equally impractical, at least these were planned for a prairie setting, where sweeping spokes and arcs were somewhat appropriate. The desultory diagonals drawn across the map of Manhattan had no such justification. The architect Ernest Flagg, nostalgic for the environment that he had known as a student at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, even had the temerity to suggest that everything between Fifth and Sixth Avenues

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be razed for a Champs Elysées travelling right up the middle of Manhattan and sweeping across Central Park. Later, John Russell Pope, affected with a similar nostalgia, recommended a variant of the plan. But large-scale City Beautiful schemes on the order of Chicago's went nowhere in New York. Hence the principal projects of urban scale at the time were scattered without connection: major park extensions in the Bronx; the beginnings of a subway system; the development of Riverside Drive and its linear park along the Hudson River, which climaxed with a mini-Pantheon monument to General Grant; and the construction of the two great railroad buildings, Pennsylvania Station and Grand Central Terminal.

Quite as important to the city's future as these were the three streets that became at this time identifying elements for the twentieth-century metropolis. First, Park Avenue: it was built as a grand boulevard bridging over what had been the open tracks of the New York Central. By the end of the 1920s the walls of mostly Renaissance-styled, deluxe apartment houses framed a boulevard through which a central garden strip ran for more than forty blocks. Grand Central Tower sat astride the street as a focal point. Until office skyscrapers began to replace the apartment buildings along much of its length in the 1950s, Park Avenue was among the few streets in the country to actualize the monumentality, uniformity, and climax for which adherents of the City Beautiful movement strove. Its buildings were constructed on a large, American scale; their thinness of wall and linearism of detailing spoke of steel-frame rather than masonry construction.

The second street to attain exceptional visibility at the time was Fifth Avenue. At the end of the nineteenth century the so-called "Ladies Mile" of luxury shopping followed the northward diagonal movement of Broadway, abruptly switching course where Broadway crosses Fifth Avenue. There stores were drawn northward up Fifth Avenue by the nouveau-riche residences in the adjacent Thirties and Forties of the Murray Hill district and, above Fiftieth Street, by a "Billionaires' Row" of mansions on the Avenue itself. These mansions were in turn steadily pushed further north by more shops until, by World War I, they fronted most of the length of Central Park, together with a few apartment houses which around this time began to lure some of the wealthy from their row houses and mansions.

Finally, there was Times Square. It had been Longacre Square until its rechristening in 1904, when *The New York Times* completed its tower smack at its center, on the wedge-shaped site made by the crossing of the Broadway diagonal with Seventh Avenue. During these years theaters increasingly moved into the area, bringing with them so much nightlife and electric light that by 1910 the area was already being called the Great White Way.

Hence New York was brought into the twentieth century by bits and pieces—by happenstance rather than by plan. Individual buildings counted for more than overarching schemes, and over New York's individual buildings McKim, Mead & White reigned supreme. Their achievement in American architecture has attained mythic proportions. If Frank Lloyd Wright comes to mind as the "greatest American architect," for the "greatest American architectural firm" the quick response is McKim, Mead & White.

At last we have two modern accounts[2] of

2 *McKim, Mead & White, Architects,* by Richard Guy Wilson; Rizzoli, 238 pages, $35; and *McKim, Mead & White, Architects,* by Leland Roth: Harper & Row, 441 pages, $40. Earlier books on the firm are: *Charles Follen McKim: A Study of His Life and Work,* by Alfred Hoy Granger: Houghton-Mifflin, 1913 (reprinted by Benjamin Blom in 1972); *The Life and Times of Charles Follen McKim,* by Charles Moore: Houghton-Mifflin, 1929 (reprinted by Da Capo Press in 1970); and *Stanford White,* by Charles C. Baldwin: Dodd-Mead, 1931 (reprinted by Da Capo Press in 1946). To these might be added a slender volume, with a limited printing, entitled *Charles F. McKim, the Man,* by Frederick Parsell Hill: M. Jones, 1950.

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the firm to supplement the earlier, anecdotal reminiscences by people who had known McKim and White personally. Richard Guy Wilson's *McKim, Mead & White, Architects* is a selective account, organized like a museum catalogue, with copious illustrations and terse critical entries. Hence it extends the ground-breaking work Wilson did with Diane Pilgrim and Richard Murray for the catalogue of the "American Renaissance" exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 1979. Leland Roth's book, also entitled *McKim, Mead & White, Architects,* is a more definitive, extended account. Taken together, these books provide the first systematic examination of the achievements of the firm. Given the vast number of buildings to be covered, both authors understandably stick close to the evolution of the firm's commissions, although McKim, Mead & White was so decidedly at the heart of the American Renaissance that one wishes for the kind of "life and times" treatment that would have more thoroughly placed it in a cultural context. Only in this way could the full implication of the firm's reputation become clear. Roth goes partway toward this explanation in his epilogue, which summarizes the vagaries of the firm's reputation, from the renown of its own day, to respectable obscurity (and worse) during the incursion of modernism, to the renown of the present, brought on by post-modernist attitudes.

The "official" photograph of the three partners, taken some time around 1905, has been so frequently reproduced that it constitutes an icon of the American profession. They sit side by side in a shadowy environment, together holding a drawing stretched like a balustrade in front of them. In the shadowy setting one can just make out that McKim has drawn up a severe windsor chair for the occasion, White a flamboyantly ornamented Renaissance seat—choices appropriate to their personalities as designers. McKim was the restrained perfectionist who almost never touched a draftsman's drawing; he gradually cajoled a design into being by making the most tenuous sketches on tracing paper which had been laid over the

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draftsman's drawings, by suggesting this or that, by refining through re-doing, re-doing, re-doing. White impetuously threw off drawing after drawing, not hesitating to mend his draftsman's work directly, and spinning off more drawings on the side for good measure. Everything was grist for White's pencil—architecture, bases for sculpture, picture frames, necklaces, magazine covers. His passion for collecting resulted in a train of crates following him home after every European trip; it could be said that these mimicked the avidity of many of the firm's clients, to whom much of his loot was eventually sold in order to finish off the Renaissance settings that the firm provided.

What was "beautiful" to McKim was "gorgeous," "bully," and "swell" to White. Draftsmen in the office who loved to work for the meticulous McKim shrank from the exuberant White, and vice versa. The partners themselves sometimes used the nicknames by which their draftsmen characterized them—Bramante, Cellini, and Dummy, the last referring to Mead. Not much of a designer by comparison with his partners, Mead served as a wise and practical critic and manager. As the balance wheel in the firm, he tried to keep his partners from "making damn fools of themselves."

Although surrounded by able practitioners (many of them having passed through the McKim, Mead & White office on the way to their own achievements), this firm occupied the pre-eminent position in the American Renaissance, acknowledged then and acknowledged still. Just why should this be?

To begin, the first definitive monuments in the American Renaissance are theirs: the Boston Public Library (1887-1895) and, in New York, the U-shaped block of five houses built for Henry Villard (1882-85) on Madison Avenue, immediately behind Saint Patrick's Cathedral (and currently serving as the *court d'honneur* to the tall skyscraper hotel to which it has been joined). Already in these buildings McKim, Mead & White expressed an architectural approach indicative of the broader cultural reorientation in the nineteenth century. Both were austere, plane-surfaced blocks and thus very different from the turret-tower-and-bay picturesqueness characteristic of the most assertive High Victorian style. There were, it should be said, precedents for this attitude toward order and discipline, most pertinently in the large, "quiet" effect sought by H. H. Richardson in his burly adaptations of Romanesque-inspired forms.

Both the Boston Library and the Villard houses depend on repetitions of simple geometrical shapes for doors, windows, and cornices, all distributed in accordance with overarching proportional schemes rather than with the typically Victorian accumulation of picturesque incident. Both buildings reveal the use of travel and photographs to give a higher degree of authenticity to moldings and ornamental detail. As Stern et al. would have it, this betokens a "scientific" approach to tradition, although "academic" better expresses the point of view. McKim, after all, was instrumental in establishing the American Academy in Rome in order to facilitate contact with the great building traditions of the past. Both palaces of course —the one public for Boston's books, the other private for a New York railroad tycoon —looked back for inspiration to Renaissance classicism and, behind the Renaissance, to antiquity. To a much lesser extent, they drew on the neoclassicism of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries. Thus the Library looked past Henri Labrouste's Bibliothèque Ste Geneviève of mid-nineteenth century Paris, back to Alberti's San Francesco in Rimini; the Villard Houses to the Roman Cancelleria, which also inspired the elevations of the central courtyard for the Library. Both, too, included finely wrought interiors based on Renaissance inspiration, and that involved collaboration with other artists and craftsmen. The Library, in fact, represented the most substantial collaboration among architect, painter, and sculptor in the United States up to that time (although, again, Richardson had shown the way with his Trinity Church across Copley Square). And now the splendid interiors of Villard's own house, carefully restored, are

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open to the public as a bar and drinking lounge for the Helmsley Palace Hotel.

Already in their early buildings McKim, Mead & White were striking the new notes of decorous splendor, informed taste, and civic awareness that generally characterized the American Renaissance and, for that matter, inspired similar movements internationally. Although all of this Renaissance work obviously depended on the eclectic use of precedent, McKim, Mead & White were rather more archaeologically inclined than many of the other major practitioners of the period.

As Stern and his colleagues point out, there were three courses of action (emphases, really) open to designers who sought an American Renaissance. Like McKim, Mead & White, they could import precedent in the archaeological sense of appropriating a specific building from the past for re-creation in a fresh context, or by amalgamating the borrowings from several sources. Or, like the New York firm of Warren & Wetmore, they could use precedent more as a generalized vocabulary of possibilities out of which to extend precedent toward something consciously new. Finally, like Louis Sullivan, they could shift the emphasis from "Renaissance" to "American" and try for something radically new. Although the third course of action was rare in New York, the warehouse stolidity of Bleeker Street is magically ornamented by a Sullivan façade, and *New York 1900* is sprinkled with fascinating attempts to do the new thing. But it is the first two approaches that really characterize the New York efforts toward an American Renaissance.

Stern et al. loosely characterize these approaches as "archaeological" and "modern French." If the distinction was blurred in practice it was nevertheless recognized at the time. McKim, Mead & White's first allegiance was to the Italian Renaissance and to antiquity, then to the English and (more especially) American Colonial Renaissance. The bias of the "modern French" contingent was determined by the extensive American presence at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The habit of attending the Ecole really became established at the end of the 1860s (when McKim himself attended) and, by the 1890s, was *de rigueur* for any young American with large ambitions in architecture. The precedents for this group were more likely to be chosen from the French Renaissance, although other national renaissances also played their part. McKim himself occasionally turned to the severer aspects of French Renaissance classicism for inspiration, but he did not much care for it. He certainly deplored the more exuberant reaches of "modern French" borrowing, which also extended to the rococo period by introducing curved forms and sometimes so much clumping of ornament that the style was jokingly referred to as "Cartouche." Whether exuberant or not, the "modern French" designers followed liberal Ecole example in their most creative work by aspiring to a "modern" classicism that would extend the great French tradition into the present. To *transmit* while adapting was, relatively speaking, McKim, Mead & White's aim; to *transform* while adapting was the aim of the leading "modern French" contingent.

The difference between the two approaches can be seen in McKim, Mead & White's late lamented Pennsylvania Station (1904-1910) and Warren & Wetmore's elegant shell for Reed & Stem's functional scheme for Grand Central Terminal (1903-13), which was worked out with William J. Wilgus, New York Central's chief engineer, who initially conceived the idea. The first displayed a canonical colonnade and entablature along its block-length front, which gave entrance through a long arcade to a waiting room modeled on the Baths of Caracalla. This in turn led to its metal-and-glass equivalent for the concourse to the trains. Even the step-by-step discreteness of the progression from portico through passage to two vaulted chambers implied an archaeological, one-thing-at-a-time approach, where inspiration (or justification) is sought part by part. By contrast, Grand Central Terminal is more of a piece, as a squat box with three huge, glass-filled, arched win-

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dows on three elevations separated by double columns of an unconventional order and without entablature, all inset in panels on each of the three elevations. A low, balustrade-like attic tops the box, with panels of garlanded vegetation. Centered over the Forty-second-Street entrance is a sumptuous cartouche with Mercury advancing over a clock across the prostrate bodies of two female allegories, who recline to either side. The waiting room is a vestibule fused to the bustle of the vast box of the concourse beyond, with so many exits and destinations all around as to quite undo the comparative serenity of McKim's Roman bath. In Grand Central, archaeological recall is substantially set aside for a new episode in classicized architecture, an episode rooted in the grand French tradition.

The more conservative of the two, McKim, Mead & White's approach was also more attuned to the American architectural ethos, which substantially accounts for the prominence of the firm in the American Renaissance. Because of the firm's use of precedents from antiquity and from the Italian Renaissance, and because of its emphasis on the ultimate extension of this tradition into late Colonial American architecture, its design speaks directly to origins: to the triple sources of the classical point of view in Greece, Rome, and Italy, and to the first American architecture of consequence as "architecture." More authoritatively than the work of any of its peers, McKim, Mead & White's design asserts a "central" position between the cosmopolitan quest for grand example and the provincial anxiety over the authenticity of detail and overall image.

The quest for precedent is a recurrent experience in the appropriation of the Renaissance ideal to American architecture. Before McKim, Mead & White there was, to take one example, Thomas Jefferson. As a skillful amateur designer, he had thought of his buildings as models of the great classical and Renaissance tradition, to be adapted to American functional needs and building technology to be sure, but also imported as explicit stylistic exemplars—in order to inform American taste. This didacticism appeared most explicitly in his scheme for the University of Virginia. There a half-scale replica of the Roman Pantheon in brick with white wood trim dominates colonnaded walkway wings; these front one-story student rooms, which are regularly interrupted by two-storied temples that originally accommodated professors' rooms upstairs and classrooms downstairs. Insofar as brick and provincial carpentry were able, each of the temples (with one exception) replicates a different example from the classical past, which were to serve as models for a future professor of architecture. The exception presented a version of the modern neoclassicism then prevalent in progressive French design, as though Jefferson meant to keep precedent open to further creation.

And after McKim, Mead & White, it was in the United States that a third Renaissance Revival began to take shape in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It showed the same sort of literal quest for precedent evident in both the work of Jefferson and McKim, Mead & White. (This literalism is to be distinguished from neoclassical tendencies intrinsic to the modern movement: for example, the Palladian parallels in Le Corbusier's early villas, or the transformation of modernist skeletal framing by means of neoclassical allusion among the Neo-Rationalists of the 1930s, or the Schinkelesque neoclassicism that informed Mies van der Rohe's design.) The Renaissance revival that began within American modernism during the 1950s and 1960s was not so much the intrinsic modulation of modern architecture by neoclassical principle as a literalistic and nostalgic evocation of Renaissance and classical precedent through image and detail. It was first in image that it occurred, notably in Philip Johnson's conversion of Mies van der Rohe's abstract neoclassicizing of metal-and-glass building into specific allusion to portico fronts for symmetrically composed glass boxes. A rash of such images followed, most conspicuously in cultural complexes like New York's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Later, the same impulse

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showed in detail, with the American post-modernist fetish for decorating the modern chassis with classicized moldings and ornament. (Still later, in the 1970s, and only gradually, did an awareness of the neoclassical theory intrinsic to much modern European architecture sophisticate the superficial American renaissancing of modernism via format and ornament.) In all three instances —in the design of Jefferson, McKim, Mead & White, and the early tendencies toward post-modernism—the recurrent theme for an American Renaissance has been partly cosmopolitan and partly provincial, concerned with grand precedent and evocative detail.

Yet there is something more to the central position of McKim, Mead & White in this series of American renaissances. Their importance may have depended in part on certain puritanical qualities in their design. In a most perceptive essay on the firm, written in 1924, the British architect-teacher Charles H. Reilly commented on this "puritanism." It is to be found in a certain plainness of outline, a homeliness of material, a flattening and reduction of borrowed detail. Such hallmarks of a provincial attitude—call it a native attitude—do not appear all together in any one building; but they do occur intermittently. Their appearance gives the sophistication of the design an American tinge, so to speak. This "tinge" can be seen in the stark boxiness of most McKim, Mead & White design, like that for their early Boston Public Library, which can be instructively compared to the more sculptural and shaped massing of Carrère & Hastings's New York Public Library (1897-1911), which hews more to the "modern French" outlook. Even when the library is a domed Pantheon, like McKim, Mead & White's Low Library centerpiece for Columbia University (1893-1913), there is some awkwardness in the cross-shaped body of the building and the bluntness of the transition to the shallow dome above. Consider the box-like directness of their academic and dormitory buildings for Columbia: these are ordered

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around the Pantheon, with gray granite Renaissance trim mediating between the brick walls and the ample, double-hung casement windows. The result is a kind of dialogue between the commonplace and the elegant. They repeatedly simplified and flattened their borrowed ornamentation. Especially in White's use of terra-cotta, they set fields and bands of intricate embellishment against laconic stretches of wall, all of the ornament obviously and elegantly adapted to machine production.

That is the other aspect of the American world that one senses in McKim, Mead & White's work—the aura of the provincial together with that of the machine. In *New York 1900* the authors discern three major possibilities in the Composite Era, but there is surely a fourth, since the self-conscious attempt to create a radically new American architecture through design of the Sullivan sort must be set against the un-self-conscious adaptation to commercial and technological needs. It was during this period that the first skyscrapers—especially in New York—epitomized in a conspicuously American way the working out of practical forces in an intensely commercial and industrial society. McKim, like Henry James, deplored the skyscraper as a leggy weed in the garden of architecture. Only reluctantly did he agree to permit his younger partners to compete for the most important of the firm's skyscrapers (he died before its completion)—the New York Municipal Building (1907-1916), a twenty-four-story, U-shaped Renaissance palace with a triumphal arch at its base, and an illusion to a Greek monument to Lysicrates at its pinnacle.

The commercial and technological forces of the period appeared throughout the firm's work, not only in the quality of ornament but also in its adaptation for modular repetition. It appeared in the way the flatness and simplification of molding accorded with the thinness of effect in the wall surfaces of skeletal steel framing, or in the rectilinearities common in the firm's design, or in the way they sometimes (especially White toward the end) enlarged the rectilinear openings of their buildings so as to nearly fill the frame with glass. (For example, in the transformation of a Venetian palace front into the skeletal openness of the old Tiffany store [1903-06] on Fifth Avenue.) There is also the firm's early and widespread use of the terra-cotta and concrete Guastavino vault.

One could find many more instances of the provincial and technological in McKim, Mead & White's buildings. But it is the sureness of proportion, the elegance of detailing, the refinement in the handling of materials, and the nobility of allusion (frankly displayed as "classical" and "Renaissance") that prevails. The point is that one feels immediate contact with the triple origins of the classical tradition, a tradition magnified and made relevant by the renewed spirit of the Renaissance so evidently coming through what can be called partly the modern, partly the American, condition.

The importance of McKim, Mead & White, finally, was in the sense they conveyed of a renaissance breaking out of the parochial shell. This effect was heightened by the immense authority of the firm; its passion for and its knowledge of the classical past; its role in diffusing a conviction and "style" by means of the gifted young men who passed through its offices; by the range of expression in its style, from the austerity of its Bramante to the panache of its Cellini, and by the prestige and wealth of its clients.

But let a foreign observer have the last word. Here, writing in a breezy, mostly critical memoir of two visits to the United States in 1935 and 1936 (the memoir was eventually translated as *When Cathedrals Were White*) is—of all unexpected enthusiasts—Le Corbusier. He had been in McKim, Mead & White's University Club, with its splendid dining room and its library, two of the greatest Renaissance-inspired interiors in America. He wrote: "In New York, then, I learn to appreciate the Italian Renaissance. It is so well done that you could believe it *to be genuine*. It even has a strange new firmness which is not Italian but American."

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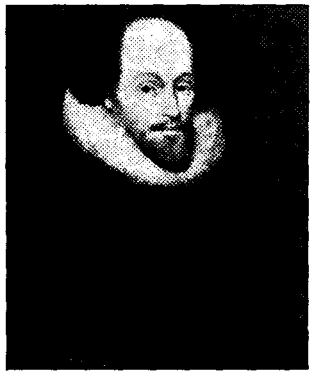
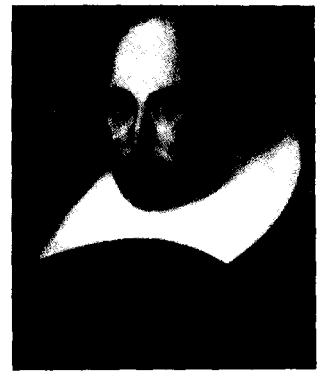
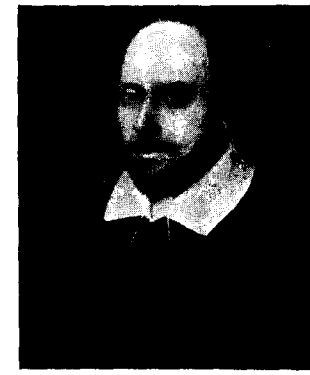

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Theater

A winter's tale

by Mimi Kramer

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world . . . .

A sad tale's best for winter.

—William Shakespeare, in *Measure for Measure* and *The Winter's Tale*

When I was a classics major at Swarthmore College I lived one year in an off-off-campus dormitory inhabited largely by amateur mountaineers and professional Californians, a city girl among a very outdoorsy set. It was a harsh winter in Pennsylvania that year and for a period of about a month I had to walk the mile or so to campus every morning through abusive wind-swept snow banks, past the modern hotel complex out to the highway, then along Highway 320 past the not-so-far-off-campus dorms and the row of shops that Swarthmore called a town, past the deserted shack it called a train station, through the dark little underpass that led to the College property, and up the long hill path that led to the administrative building where most of my classes in Homer and Virgil were held. Pretty rough country.

The friend with whom I habitually made this journey was a genuine Californian, had done a certain amount of hiking in his day, and knew how to spell things like "piton," "carabiner," and "Big Sur." Being the sort of person whose bad behavior is made worse by other people's good behavior, I used to make it my business on these expeditions to try to render my companion quite as miserable as I was by complaining energetically every step of the way until, one day, he managed to shut me up by telling me a story.

In 1910 (or thereabouts), he said, a party of Englishmen undertook an expedition to the South Pole under the leadership of a certain Captain Scott, an adventurer of sorts who wanted to be the first man to see the Pole. The expedition became a race between Scott's men and a party of Norwegians under the leadership of a man called Amundsen, my friend explained, a kind of pre-Olympics Olympic event—a trial by endurance to see which nation would get to the Pole fastest. The Norwegians won, which was to be expected because the English were actually rather foolish about strategy. Amundsen, with a better head for travel arrangements, had set off for the Pole with a pack of huskies, which he intended to use for transport on the way down and food on the way back. But Scott, thinking it barbaric to kill and eat domestic animals that had served one loyally and in good faith, disdained to use any dogs at all.

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Amundsen's journey, said my friend, went off without a hitch: the Norwegians scarcely suffered any hardships, let alone casualties or losses. The dogs had been a good idea.

Captain Scott's party arrived at the Pole only to find that the Norwegians had beaten them there by nearly a month. What's more, said my friend, the English never made it home again. They ran out of food on the way back and one by one they died—of wounds, of cold, of starvation, of despair. Scott himself was the last to die and did so knowing that he was within only about ten miles of safety. He spent his final waking hours trying to leave a written record of the expedition's journey, which was how one knew the story at all.

A sad tale's best for winter and this one did its job: we got to class in record time, pausing only because I burst into tears just on the other side of the railway underpass. We were within sight of our destination but the story had a coda: one of Scott's men had simply walked out of the tent one night and kept on walking. A fellow called Titus Oates. "I'm just going out for some air," he'd said. "I may be some time."

Looking back it seems to me that I wept pretty continuously throughout college, but only on two occasions can I remember shedding tears for someone other than myself. The first time was sitting in an armchair and reading Book 22 of *The Iliad*: I wept for Hector. The second time was standing in the middle of Magill Walk weeping for a fellow called Titus Oates, whom I'd never heard of before but who seemed to represent the tragedy of epic heroism.

So affecting a story, you would think, might have left some lasting impression on me. I might have thought of it again or found myself checking up on Captain Scott in an idle moment in some library or bookstore. I never did though. His story faded completely from my memory along with most of what I learned in school, so that I had no idea what I was going off to see last spring when someone urged me to catch a play called *Terra Nova* at the American Place Theater. I had never known the name of Scott's ship (or even that he'd had a ship), so the title of the play meant nothing to me. I knew what it was about; I read the story in the program: "In the winter of 1911-1912 five Britons and five Norwegians raced each other to the bottom of the earth. Only the five Norwegians returned. This is the story of the Britons." One name in the cast of characters left me vaguely troubled: Titus Oates. It was a peculiar name and seemed familiar, but I couldn't think where I might have heard it before. And frankly, if you'd asked me to name a British explorer who'd led an unsuccessful expedition to the South Pole in the twilight of the Edwardian era, I might well have said Admiral Bird.

The play began inauspiciously with a magic-lantern show and a multimedia effect produced by the sound of rushing winds and a series of documentary slides that seemed to locate the world of the play firmly in the Smithsonian Institution. But after about forty-five seconds of this, an opening line took hold of your heart and gripped. In a soft pool of light a man appeared. He wore a large chunky anorak and a balaclava and, leaning a small notebook on one knee, he seemed awkwardly to be trying to write in spite of a pair of bulky mittens. He peered out at the audience, unseeing; and as the wind rose and then died sharply, he began to speak. "Message to the public," he said. "The causes of the disaster are these."

A second man appeared in a brighter spotlight wearing white tie and tails. Ladies and Gentlemen, he began, addressing us as members of the Royal Geographical Society, and proceeded to introduce "England's own hero of the Antarctic: Captain Robert Falcon Scott!" A third spotlight, still brighter, turned on the man at center stage. The Master of Ceremonies waited expectantly but Scott went on writing: "I do not think human beings ever came through such a month as we have come through, and we should have succeeded in spite of the weather, except . . ." He faltered suddenly, appealing to the Master of Ceremonies. "I can't move the pencil," he explained. The

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MC looked annoyed and flustered: Scott was failing to pick up on his cue. It was his turn to speak to the Royal Geographical Society. "What's the matter," he whispered urgently, trying to get Scott's attention. "The members are waiting." But Scott seemed disoriented, seemed not to know where he was. The race, prompted the MC, wasn't Scott going to tell us about the race? "Ah yes," Scott said sadly and a little bitterly, "Yes. Everyone loves a race."

Come on then, said the Master of Ceremonies. "Mustn't disappoint them, Scott. So many wanting to know." But Scott explained that there was something wrong with his hands. Couldn't he rest for a bit? He was so dreadfully tired. A beautiful woman appeared wearing a light summer frock. She asked if Scott would be coming in soon as it was getting dark. He couldn't feel the pencil anymore, Scott explained, but it was very important that he talk to her. He wanted to tell her about the most extraordinary place he'd seen.

A sad tale's best for winter, so why bring all this up now? I saw *Terra Nova* way back in the spring. So why tell a winter's tale in summer to be read well into fall? Merely because things tend to get a little slow around the New York stage in August?

Terra Nova was the best thing I saw in New York last year—and I saw some pretty good things. I liked the new Stephen Sondheim an awful lot; the new David Mamet was an extraordinary evening in the theater; and I adored the new Beth Henley. But Ted Tally's *Terra Nova* may be the most moving play I've ever seen—I'm not sure. Of this year's offerings it was certainly the most beautifully crafted and presented, the most perfectly directed and performed. And the only thing sadder than the play itself was the unaccountably brief run it had at the American Place Theater, where it was being produced in conjunction with Playwrights Horizons.

How gracefully understated were these performances by the standards of New York acting! How perfectly this cast (not all of them English) seemed to create the illusion of people from another time and place! And how deftly they avoided routine portrayals of characters whom lesser actors might easily have rendered routine: Robert Foxworth as the self-doubting hero; Simon Jones as Wilson, the doctor and second-in-command who shares most of Scott's knowledge and foreboding but none of his guilt; Ian Trigger as the spritely little Cockney who tries to keep everyone jolly with smutty humor; Michael Countryman as Evans, the working-class Welshman who keeps his early injury a secret for fear of being sent home; Daniel Gerroll as Oates, the staunch army man who blames the disaster on the Welshman's unsoldierly failure to put the good of the troop and mission before his own heroic longings. All of them transcended the stock functions of their roles.

As Scott, Robert Foxworth was perhaps a little too heavily influenced by the William Shatner school of acting—where you pause slightly before every twelfth word to show that you are playing a fallible hero—but only the tiniest bit. And the poised intelligence and pre-Raphaelite beauty of Christine Healy (as Scott's wife Kathleen) would be welcome in some of the roles that actresses of more elephantine accomplishments are customarily squeezed into on Broadway. As Amundsen, Anthony Zerbe moved skillfully through the whole spectrum of atmospheric shades that haunt Scott, flitting in and out of his consciousness: caustic and contemptuous as Scott's rival, relentless as the embodiment of his doubts, laconic as a specter of death, and unsentimental as the part of Scott's conscience that brings him final consolation in a sense of necessary destiny.

This company of artists, a little like Scott's men, seemed to have appeared from out of nowhere and to have landed in the middle of nowhere—they seemed to belong neither on the stage of the American Place Theater nor under the aegis of Playwrights Horizons. There was an otherworldly quality about them and about the way they produced—though they were not a repertory company at

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all—the kind of exquisitely unified ensemble acting that New York so badly needs and so rarely ever finds. And like some chimera that one might see glistening in the distance if, like the characters in the play, one had travelled to the edges of the world, *Terra Nova* was there one moment, then it was gone.

Nor does it seem likely that anyone will think of reviving the play here for a while. So this review has little purpose beyond that of paying tribute to absent virtue—because a good play, like a good performance, is a kind of fact: it is something that took place. And such a fact deserves to be recorded, however untimely the entry. It seemed to me that there are certain things that need to be said about *Terra Nova* and why, like the expedition it depicts, it never should have failed.

The fact that it did fail may be due, in part, to the nature of the subject matter which, granted, is a little old-fashioned. At any rate, the young Englishman I chatted with one night in an expensive restaurant in Soho thought it was. He was appalled to learn that I had liked *Terra Nova*. And over the crème brulée he explained, slowly and carefully, that there was nothing the least bit tragic about Scott's expedition to the Pole because the whole thing was a pointless nationalistic exploit undertaken in a spirit of British chauvinism. What was the desire for Englishmen to be the first to see the Pole, after all, but a last little stab at empire-building. Besides, he said, the Englishmen's part in the race had been stupidly bungled: the result of bad planning, not cruel fate. The refusal to use dogs had been merely a form of Edwardian prudery.

The problem with this argument, as I see it, is that it leaves a lot of guys in a very funny position. Like Hector and Roland and Hamlet. You might just as well argue that there is nothing tragic about *La Chanson de Roland* because Charlemagne's expedition against the Moors was a completely pointless venture wholly motivated by an insane kind of Christian chauvinism—and anyway, why didn't Roland just blow the stupid horn! Of course Scott's expedition was un-

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necessary and of course it was stupidly bungled. All *beaux gestes* are: that is what makes them *beaux* rather than *sages* or *bien faits*. It is not in the nature of the epic hero to be wise or prudent; that is the business of his sidekick—*"Roland est preux, et Olivier est sage"*—the guy who tells him what an ass he's been. It is the essence of the epic hero's ethos and temperament *not* to blow the horn, *not* to stay by the ramparts with Andromache, *not* to bring the dogs—and then to experience a moment of regret.

A more serious set of criticisms came from John Simon, the theater critic for *New York* magazine, who damned Tally's play with faint praise when he described *Terra Nova* as "an intelligent, intermittently imaginative, and generally honest effort that deserves commendation" but "does not, however, command enthusiasm." Mr. Simon is not a critic to resort to thinking on the level of the crème-brulée argument: he began his review, in fact, by re-affirming the tragic value of the Scott story before going on to fault the play.

> Robert Falcon Scott's heartrending defeat by Amundsen, the ineffable hardships he and his four companions endured, the fiendishly bad luck that dogged them to the end, the avoidability of their deaths if only this or that had or had not happened, and the unsurpassable gallantry and camaraderie these men displayed unto and in their deaths—all that, regrettably, is not ideal material for the stage.

I disagree. I think ideal material for the stage is exactly what it is—or rather, that it became stageworthy because of the way Ted Tally handled it.

A lot of what was so good about *Terra Nova* had to do with the playwright's use of stage space. Confronted with the problem of how to transform the static locality of the stage area into a medium fit for representing a journey, Tally wisely chose the Willy-Loman technique of locating much of the action in the hero's mind. Throughout the play—as in the opening scene—characters and figures from the past were constantly impinging on the present so that sections of the stage were able to furnish us with the revelations of another time and place without our ever having to leave the progress of the journey—a unity of place of sorts. But Tally used this device more intricately than Arthur Miller did in *Death of a Salesman*; for where Miller's play relies largely on freezing or fading out the action of the present while Willy makes his mental excursions into the past, *Terra Nova* frequently abandons realism completely, bringing non-realistic figures onstage to observe, comment on, and sometimes take part in the action of the present.

This technique (which Marsha Norman also used to good advantage in her early play, *Getting Out*) is quite economical. It allows the playwright to establish necessary information, to effect ironic contrasts in the juxtaposition of past and present, and to keep the audience abreast of the hero's state of mind. The more imaginary figures intrude on the action of the play, the more we know we have to worry about a Willy Loman or a Captain Scott. Tally found a way, moreover, to use this departure from realism as a way of controlling the emotional level in the theater. Thus the figure of Amundsen, haunting the stage as the specter of death, provided a non-realistic presence during some of the more harrowing scenes (like that of Evans's death), which otherwise might have been unbearable. And similarly, the non-realistic figure of Kathleen, cradling Evans's corpse in her lap while Scott relived an optimistic conversation with her about their son, allowed Tally to make a point about Scott's feelings for his men without lapsing into mawkishness.

I think what gets me, though, about the idea of snubbing Tally's stagecraft is that he took the opportunity in *Terra Nova* to resurrect a literary device that has virtually disappeared from the modern stage: dramatic irony—the playwright's ability to exploit the fact that the story he is telling is one whose outcome the audience already knows. Act I had ended with the English party's arrival at the Pole and the discovery of their defeat.

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So stirring was the juxtaposition of Scott's outward show of bravery ("I shan't expect any man to smile. But I would take it as a favor if no man looked as though he were beaten") with his anguished cry of defeat ("But Great God, this is an awful place!") that you wondered where the rest of the play could possibly go.

Act II began, strangely, with a banquet scene. As the lights came up, the five members of the expedition, in formal evening dress, were gathering before an elegantly laid banquet table and greeting one another as though after a long absence. Taking their seats, they set about ordering an expensive and elaborate meal. Their aspect as they laughed and joked, alternately insulting and congratulating one another, was so exactly what one had come to expect from them (only transposed to more stately circumstances) that for several moments you were unable to put your finger on exactly what was wrong with the scene.

Everything was perfect: the centerpiece, the chandelier; Evans's awkward fumbling over the French menu and Oates's contempt for his boorish lack of sophistication. Most perfect of all was the high-handed manner in which all of the men spoke to the French waiter—"Of course," you smiled to yourself, "that is exactly how these fellows would behave toward a French waiter!" There was a tiny irony here because the waiter was actually played by their rival, Amundsen, which almost gave the scene the aspect of a vengeful fantasy: it was so satisfying to see them all being rude to the man who had bested them so devastatingly.

Then, as Scott rose to speak and you realized that this was a reunion dinner years after the expedition to the Pole, to commemorate their safe return, it dawned on you—what was wrong with the scene was that it couldn't be taking place. You knew how the story ended: they had never made it home. So what was going on here? You had assumed that this scene, like the other non-realistic elements in the play, was a memory. As it slowly began to occur to you that this was not a memory but some-

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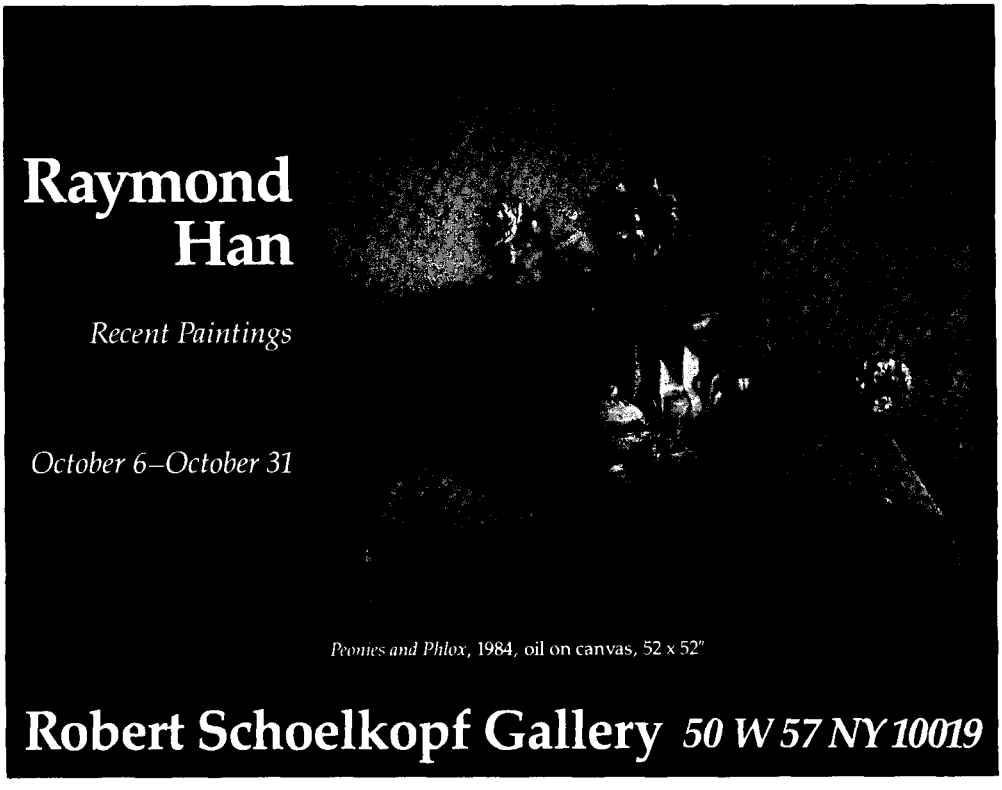
one's dream, very slowly and painfully your heart began to break. Because the way your thoughts next tended was toward the motivation for the fantasy and the question of what must be happening in reality to inspire this particular scene. Home thoughts from abroad?—yes, sure. But why was someone dreaming about a banquet? And just as you started to wonder how the playwright would return us to the real-life expedition, Amundsen came back, no longer dressed as a waiter, and announced that there was no food. The chandelier disappeared, the tablecloth came off, the centerpiece and table settings were packed away inside the table, which turned out to have been the sled all along. And as the men began filing out politely ("Yes, well perhaps another time . . .") and as Amundsen handed Scott his balaclava and helped him don the anorak over his dinner jacket, the Norwegian seemed—with no visible alteration in his manner or costume—to take on the palpable aspect of Death.

Terra Nova is probably not a masterpiece of English letters. I don't mean to hold it up as a great work of literature. I'd just like to put on record that if it lacked for greatness it came pretty damn close and that it deserved far better than it got. It's virtue, I think, lay in the way it managed to say what it had to say without actually saying it, using theater to make certain points as only theater knows how. The scene that opened the second act produced an effect that can only be experienced in a theater because it relied on the huge distances that stage-time and stage-space create in the rarefied atmosphere a theater audience inhabits.

That theater is primarily a visual medium is something Ted Tally's play never forgot. But epic is traditionally an oral medium—which is why it makes sense to me that nothing in *Terra Nova* reminded me of the story I had heard nearly ten years before. More than the inaccuracies with which the story had been handed down to me, though, what kept me from recognizing anything in *Terra Nova* beyond the strange sound of Titus Oates's name was Tally's depiction of hero-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ism as complex rather than simplistic. Like all sound epic, *Terra Nova* dwelt as lingeringly on the ugly aspects of the *beau geste* as on its fairer face. The death of Titus Oates was unrecognizable to me simply because the character of Oates, as written and performed, bore so little resemblance to the character my imagination had proposed to me. My vision of Oates's death had been beautiful; but there was no beautiful death in *Terra Nova.* Consequently, it was only in the act of telling the story myself days later, urging someone else to go and see the play, that I remembered how the story had first been told to me.

Telling the story is really the whole point here. If *Terra Nova* kept faith with good epic tradition by encouraging us to regard the epic hero with equal parts of fear and honor both, it also kept faith with the artistic ethos of the genre by locating the motivation for the narrative in the hero's need to have the story be his monument. That is what makes all great tales of monumental bungling in the rear guard sad—in literature and history, at Roncevaux, at Thermopylae, at Syracuse: the fact that there comes a moment when all that the hero has left, in the knowledge of his *belle folie,* is the hope that his story may be told. Cheer up, chaps! Aeneas tells his men in a particularly rough moment at sea, "Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit!" ("Someday this may actually make a good story!") That is what Hector's dying words are all about when, trapped outside the walls of Troy, he turns and, seeing Achilles coming at him, suddenly knows he's bought it. "When I die," he prays, "let it be with no light fame / But having wrought something estimable for those who come after me to hear of." And the poet's song itself fulfills the hero's wish. In *Terra Nova* it is Scott's attempt to become his own poet, to leave a written record that he may be extinguished with no light fame, that begins and ends the play, and in a sense, seemed to justify the playwright's saddening us with his wintery tale.

It is summer now and feats of personal heroism are more in vogue than they were in May. As I sit at the typewriter, someone calls me into the other room to watch the end of the women's marathon on television. An American will finish far ahead of a Norwegian and keep on running until she gets the flag. A Swiss girl will almost fail to finish and, staggering hideously, have to be carried off the track. I don't much care about sports and can't wait for people to start talking about something other than the Olympics; but all over the country audiences are caught up in the drama of pointless nationalistic exploits performed by determined individuals. Everyone loves a race.

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Art

American still life

by Eric Gibson

"American Still Life 1945-1983," organized by Linda L. Cathcart of the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston and on view at the Neuberger Museum at Purchase, New York, this summer,[1] is the kind of exhibition that would have been unthinkable ten, even five years ago, except as a show of more traditional painting. The term "still life," with its visions of jugs, fish, and fruit, inevitably connoted archaism, an embracing of pictorial concerns far removed from the recent interests of contemporary art.

Yet it is no longer so preposterous to imagine still life coming into vogue as a vital artistic issue. It has been made possible, in part, by the emergence of aesthetic pluralism that acquired currency in the 1970s—the idea that multiple modes of artistic expression could co-exist in the artistic landscape where previously one mode had tended to dominate—and by the slackening of modernist orthodoxies, and with it the reintroduction of figurative imagery.

This new focus on still life might have been expected to concentrate on familiar figurative artists, such as Fairfield Porter, whose voices tended to be lost in the hullabaloo attending Pop Art, Minimalism, and the like. What makes "American Still Life" an event is that the revival of the genre is shown to amount to something more than this. Owing to recent shifts in aesthetic outlook, still life has become the province of such prominent younger artists as Eric Fischl, Jedd Garet, Neil Jenney, and Troy Brauntuch. It is this which accounts for the new vogue the genre has lately acquired, and for the decision to give it, in the form of a forty-year survey, the attention it would not otherwise be given just now.

As befits a long-neglected topic newly charged with aesthetic interest, Linda Cathcart has adopted a highly catholic approach —too catholic at times. One senses here both a zeal that will exclude nothing from consideration no matter how marginal its claims and a desire to redress past injustices. Regular practitioners are thus included, as are artists whose still-life production, however limited, is consistent with their oeuvre and Miss Cathcart's definition of the genre: "*nature morte* or *natura un posa,* wherein inanimate objects are isolated and are in repose and there is no implication of action." Thus a painter like William Bailey is an obvious choice, with his pure, classic studies of household objects. But room is also found for the likes of Jasper Johns, Walter Murch, Audrey Flack, and Richard Piccolo.

This kind of wide-ranging focus is not without its problems. For one thing, some of the work on display, notably that of Eric

1 "American Still Life 1945-1983," was organized by Linda L. Cathcart of the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, where it opened in the fall of 1983. Thereafter it travelled to Buffalo, New York, Columbus, Ohio, and Purchase, New York. It can currently be seen at the Portland (Oregon) Art Museum, until December 9.

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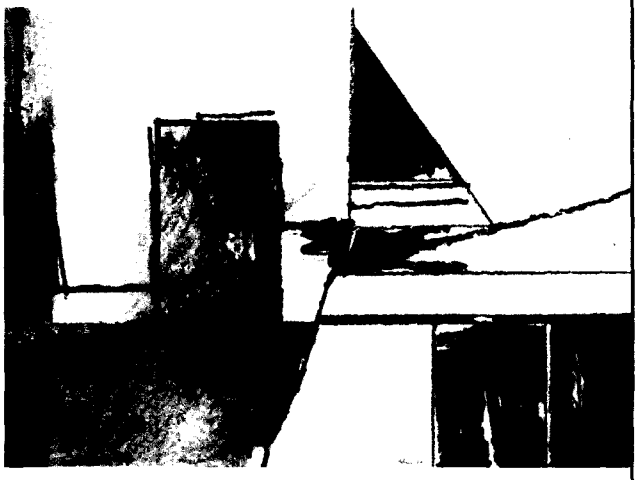

"Drawing #1," 1983, charcoal 19 x 26"

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Fischl, Troy Brauntuch, Neil Jenney, and Jedd Garet, is linked to the idea of still life in only the most tenuous fashion. This leads one to suspect these artists were included mainly to legitimize the idea of the exhibition—to free it from its retardataire associations—and to round out the roster with some "names." For example, Neil Jenney's *Paint and Painted,* a view of a paint roller, pan, and swaths of paint, is less a study of still life than a visual pun on painters' work and their product.

A work by Jud Nelson points to a problem of another sort. He gives us, immaculately carved in marble and wholly illusionistic, two toilet rolls, one with its wrapping on, the other without. However neatly these may fit into the governing premise of the exhibition, they turn out to have little to recommend them as art.

In order to account for such dubious choices in "American Still Life," we must return to the idea of pluralism. During the Fifties and Sixties it was widely assumed that only one style dominated the art scene, making the history of that period a succession of movements: Abstract Expressionism, Color Field, Pop, and so on. In the Seventies, however, many different tendencies were seen to proliferate simultaneously.

Unfortunately "pluralism" acquired a mystique of its own. It came to stand for a critical approach—or should I say an uncritical approach—in which almost anything was accepted and almost no attempt was made to separate bad from good. After two decades of aesthetic dogmatism, we embraced in the Seventies a period of ecumenism. Under the pluralist dispensation there were no hierarchies; diversity became a kind of fetish. Indeed, the whole notion of quality in art—the idea that there are some works which deserve our attention and others which do not—came under attack for being fundamentally elitist.

The pendulum is swinging back, of course, but not in a clean arc, and not to quite so extreme a position as before. Today we find ourselves in a period of more or less pronounced directions, but the classifica-

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tions are loose, and several kinds of art are likely to claim our attention simultaneously. Neo-Expressionism is probably the most pronounced, but it embraces a number of subheadings, and there is plenty of room outside it for other, unrelated tendencies. Thus, while there has been some movement toward a broad-based style, there still lingers some vestige of the "anything goes" pluralist ethos that informed the outlook of the Seventies. And it is this latter sensibility which is so much in evidence in "American Still Life."

There are exceptions. Where we are allowed to explore nuances of feeling within one narrow style, the wide-focus approach pays dividends. In the trio of paintings by William Bailey, Gabriel Laderman, and Paul Wiesenfeld, for instance, we find three Realist painters engaged with nearly identical motifs: bowls, jugs, and pitchers for Bailey and Laderman, a coffee service for Wiesenfeld. Bailey and Wiesenfeld are further linked by the near-photographic illusionism of their styles.

Yet worlds separate these three painters. Bailey's hushed, austere paintings are filled with Puritan rigor and restraint. In them the artist wrests his emotion from a series of crisp, tense relationships. Laderman places four earthenware vessels and some simple wooden forms on a table, bathes the scene in a blinding, Diebenkorn-like light, and sets the table corner-on to the viewer in an aggressive but firmly controlled opening of pictorial space. The contrast to Bailey's almost spaceless indoor groupings, with their soft shadows and muted tonalities, could not be more extreme. None of Bailey's quiet interiority is here; everything is externalized. Through purely formal means—light, space, form, and placement—Laderman exposes us to the kind of emotional charge Bailey uses all his formal powers to curb and contain.

In Wiesenfeld's *Coffee Service,* cups, sugar bowl, creamer, and coffee pot are set out on a polished wooden table. This is an elegant, Thirties coffee service, and Wiesenfeld is more interested in the sensuous, idiosyncratic look of things than either Bailey or Laderman, both of whose forms are more generalized. But what really differentiates Wiesenfeld is the tension in his work. In part this is compositional. Unlike Bailey's objects, Wiesenfeld's are noticeably separated, suggesting a combination of randomness and order in their placement. Yet something more profound is involved here. Neither close enough to form a unity nor separated enough to be read individually, his objects are like people—a family—too independent to live together yet too scared to move on. In an elegant, quietly moving way, Wiesenfeld makes still life a symbol for an existential condition.

Confronting these and other contrasts, we can only conclude that "American Still Life" stands a house divided. It is in fact split into two quite separate exhibitions. The first is the survey whose governing criterion is still life in its broadest, most uncensored manifestation. The other, smaller show might be called "The Idea of Still Life." It is for the most part made up of work which, while it might stand in oblique relation to "the idea of still life," nonetheless emits more profound, more telling resonances. And it is in this second show that we learn what is important to learn in this survey: just what the genre of still life has come to mean in our time.

What could this be? Simply, that still life has succeeded best when it has deliberately turned away from faithfully transcribing reality to record what is seen or imagined by the inner eye. There is some irony in this, for after decades of abstraction it was one of the expectations of the realist revival in the Seventies that it would give new life to such genres as still life. And yet our experience of the various Realist offerings in this exhibition—those of Mary Ann Currier, Paul Wonner, Jim Sullivan, Alfred Leslie, Audrey Flack, James Valerio, Ralph Goings, Janet Fish, Gregory Gillespie, and Ed Baynard—is almost uniformly disappointing. Unlike Richard Diebenkorn and Fairfield Porter, who draw on the conventions of the schools of

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Paris and New York to inform and structure their Realist visions—Diebenkorn in his sun-drenched, constructed views and Porter in his evocations of mood and moment—some of these Realist painters narrowly center their art around formalist explorations and technical sleights of hand.

In this we are presented with another paradox. Formalism is an aesthetic doctrine which makes the means of painting—color, the flatness of the support, its edge and shape—the subject matter of a wholly abstract art, one utterly devoid of narrative or of references to the natural world. Yet we find the formalist approach appropriated by Realist painters of varying stripes, precisely those painters formalist art was supposed to supplant in its historically mandated drive toward "purity." Thus Janet Fish, in *Raspberries and Goldfish,* gives us an array of glass dishes, vases, and bowls next to a curtained, sunlit window. It is not so much nature that interests her as the challenge posed by the multiple light reflections on the glassware and the shifting transparencies of color. And in isolating and emphasizing these aspects of her subject she establishes the craft of painting—rather than the fact of nature—as her actual subject. Her aesthetic kinship is thus with the work of such formalist abstractionists as Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis.

There is little, then, that the strictly realist vision has to add to our experience of the art of still life, and it is for this reason that much of the Realist portion of "American Still Life" is something of a letdown. And it suffers a further blow with David Smith's *Voltri XVI,* one of the artist's tableaux of objects on a work table. This is one of the most inspired selections to be seen in the exhibition, and it clearly belongs to the "Idea of Still Life." It dramatically expands our understanding not only of the artist's work, but also of what still life had come to mean in the decades following World War II. In *Voltri XVI* the genre of still life is coupled with that of self-portraiture. In the arrangement of simple geometric forms—a spiral ziggurat, and a number of sections of

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some thick, squared-off steel tube—we are given, in coded form, a glimpse of the artist's image of himself. I do not think it going to far to say that in the stacked and clustered squared forms is to be found an allusion to Smith's activity as a sculptor—in particular to his accretive method—and in the small-scale ziggurat a statement about the nature and extent of his own aspirations as an artist. This is one "still life," surely, which strips the genre of its descriptive function and annexes it to the realm of the subjective imagination.

In a work such as this, with its emphasis on inwardness, there can be no doubt that we are at the center of a modernized conception of still life. This turning inward, and with it the development of a vital tension between the exigencies of the motif and the pull of the subjective self, is what has characterized and kept alive the art of still life in our time. (Interestingly, the work of William Bailey reverses this tension. His meticulously painted still lifes are taken entirely from the imagination and given the appearance of something objective and observed.) At the same time, it is these characteristics which have cut the ground out from under still life as it has been handed down to us by history.

Along with the David Smith, the finest works in "American Still Life" are those in which the artist has either turned entirely away from objective transcription or has given "mere representation" an added dimension or resonance. In this group one may place such diverse works as those by Bailey, Laderman, and Wiesenfeld, Jasper Johns's *Bronze,* a chilling bronze casting of a light bulb, socket, and cord—actually more "stilled" than "still" life—as well as Richard Diebenkorn's and Fairfield Porter's paintings. Also included might be Albert York's lush but reticent depictions of flowers against distant landscapes; Morris Graves's fragile, febrile paintings of single flowers in individual, widely spaced vases; Jane Wilson's quirky *Blue Carafe*; Walter Murch's luminous, magical pictorial assemblages, and Vija Celmins's scrumptious *Soup,* a din-

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er's eye view of a steaming ladleful of soup and dumplings being emptied into an already brimming porcelain soup bowl.

Especially interesting in this group is Lucas Samaras's sculpture *Dinner #2.* Here, on a layer of ball bearings, sits a crystal wineglass, a glass scoop spilling more bearings, a fork so misshapen it is unusable, and at the center a plate overflowing with fragments of stocking, wire mesh, glass, and metal. *Dinner #2* utterly subverts the traditional still-life idea of objects presented for our delectation—tellingly it is placed near Celmins's soup—in its fusion of the scintillating and the repellent. It is the heir in its Surrealist displacement to the celebrated fur-lined cup of Meret Oppenheim, and its glittering bearings add a dimension of irony akin to Jasper Johns's loose painterly stroke in images of spiritual desolation.

In *Dinner #2* we again find ourselves at some remove from still life as it has been defined in the past, and as it is presented to us in the more traditional—or should one say retrograde—works in this exhibition. Yet there can be no doubt, in its appeal to the more unpredictable, irrational side of the human psyche, that it is closer to the world as we have come to know it than the cheerful transcriptions of "reality" to be found elsewhere in the show.

"American Still Life 1945-1983," then, is not one, but two exhibitions: a general, broad-based historical survey, and a body of work that stands in a somewhat equivocal relation to the still life itself. So great is the chasm separating the two that one wonders whether their collision in a single exhibition is deliberate or merely a residue of the much-loved pluralism of the Seventies.

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Books

The passions of Hilla Rebay

by Lee Hall

The Baroness Hilla von Rebay died in 1967 after years of close association with Solomon Guggenheim, his collection, and his museum. Today, mention of her name is likely to elicit a slight smirk and some clever remark about "the mistress of Solomon Guggenheim." Only occasionally will she be given credit for her almost fanatical dedication to modernist art at a time when it was unfashionable and her important influence on the collection that came to form the Guggenheim Museum.

I began Joan M. Lukach's *Hilla Rebay: In Search of the Spirit in Art*[1] fully prepared for a biography that catalogued Rebay's familiar eccentricities. But I hoped for one that did something more—that made some attempt to separate her life from her legend, to understand her actions, to fit her into the larger pattern of art and life in the twentieth century. I surfaced, in the end, somewhere between the two. In Lukach's book, Hilla Rebay is an attractive, vigorous, zealous woman who, though evil-tongued and evil-tempered, though dumbly opinionated and unpredictable, if not unstable at times, contributed enormously to a great collection of modernist art. The inner recesses of her life, however, remain hidden.

Joan Lukach, the director of the Vassar College Art Gallery, was curator of the Hilla Rebay Foundation Archives of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum from 1974 to 1982. She is a careful researcher and obviously knows well the documents in that collection, which includes many letters to and from the Baroness. Unfortunately, although Lukach has talked to many people who knew Hilla Rebay, she strays only slightly beyond the boundaries of the Foundation. Thus, if *Hilla Rebay* is not technically an official biography, it might as well be. Lukach paints a clear, if limited, picture of the Baroness, of Germany in the fertile artistic valley between the two wars, of the United States in a more innocent and hopeful time, of the incubation and hatching of the Guggenheim collection, and of the designing of Frank Lloyd Wright's building. But throughout the fare is slight, inadequately seasoned, and just a little too pat. Is Lukach's admirable sense of decorum screening out the more interesting, if coarser, elements of the story?

As a young woman, Rebay describes herself in a letter: "I am unable to love—there is always something that makes me crazy . . . ." And later: "I have too much in me not to achieve something great even if I am only a stupid woman, whether anyone believes it or not.... I will achieve something anyway, preferably for others, but, if not, for myself." These letters were written to Rudolf Bauer, the artist Rebay championed and protected against his own knavery and small talent. For most of her life, she loved him and suffered (perhaps even needed to suffer) his abuse. Here, between the reference points of mas-

1 *Hilla Rebay: In Search of the Spirit in Art* by Joan M. Lukach; George Braziller, 366 pages, $30.

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ochistic love, the self-perceived inability to love and be loved, and a burning ambition, might be stretched the psyche of Hilla Rebay. But Lukach rarely challenges Rebay's self-portraits and does little to discern in Rebay's theatricality and posturing the driving forces at the core of her life.

Hilla Rebay, born the Baroness Hildegard Anna Augusta Elisabeth Rebay von Ehrenwiesen on May 31, 1890, in Strassburg, Alsace, was the second child of Baron Franz Josef Rebay von Ehrenwiesen and his wife, Antonie. The Baron, a Bavarian, was a career officer in the Prussian army and his wife the orphaned daughter of a prominent industrial family. Both of Hilla's parents displayed an ability with art, the father as an expert furniture carver and painter of watercolor landscapes and the mother as a painter. Young Hilla's early demonstrations of talent—in painting and drawing—elicited applause and enthusiasm from her parents, who enlisted her in formal teaching as soon as possible. From all evidence, Hilla was a loved and cherished—even spoiled and indulged—girl who grew up within a close family of sufficient wealth and social standing to permit her to do exactly as she pleased.

By her fourteenth year, and without her parents' knowing it, Hilla began attending classes in theosophy. Over the next several years her search for mystical faith took her into explorations of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, transcendentalism, and various permutations of the occult. She was still trying to synthesize her religious and artistic drives when she arrived in Paris to study art in 1909. She had decided to commit herself to "living exclusively for art," whatever personal anguish it might bring ("art is very difficult, despair a daily occurrence").

In Paris, surrounded by people equally dedicated to living exclusively for art and equally eager to discuss their vision, Rebay melded her aesthetic and religious faiths: art stood for her thereafter as a form of religious expression. Under the sway of such a passion, she began her art studies in earnest, vowing to earn her living as a portrait painter. Thanks to the support of her parents, she freely explored art in classes and in her travels. On a visit to Munich she met the German Jugendstil painter Fritz Erler (1868-1940), who persuaded her to move her studio from Paris to Munich. In the years 1910 and 1911 she continued to paint with a view toward exhibiting in the traditional salons, but she also began to write home of her concerns for "our modern art." She was in fact moving—however tentatively—into the speeding currents of European modernism. Once fully immersed, she would become a great evangelist for modernist art, which for her would prove to be the Absolute Truth, the physical manifestation of her conviction that art was religious expression.

On the verge of this epiphany, Rebay returned to Paris, where she earnestly studied the works of Delacroix, Daubigny, Millet, Manet, Degas, and the Nabis and read the journals of Delacroix and the letters of Van Gogh. In 1913, she exhibited her work with the "Independents," including Archipenko, Brancusi, Chagall, Delaunay, Gleizes, Rivera, and Van Rees. Writing to her parents, she confided: ". . . my own works are hideous. It's sad that art is as hard as it is. The further one goes the harder it gets."

Soon after her Paris exhibition, Rebay moved to Berlin, where the two sides of her personality emerged sharply, finding expression in her two different careers in art. While she painted portraits in a relatively traditional manner, she also practiced the role of modernist in other works. Similarly, her personal life was divided between expectations, responsibilities, and rewards associated with her privileged background and experiments in art and life stemming from her commitment to bohemian modernism.

During her twenties, too, Rebay became aware of her own allure. At one point she considered marrying a British diplomat, but the First World War ended the romance. (In Lukach's biography we learn neither the identity of the suitor nor Rebay's response to losing him.) Rebay seems to have turned directly from the truncated relationship to the patriotic duties appropriate to a career

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officer's daughter. She even passed a nursing examination.

During this period of her life, Rebay enjoyed the affections of Arthur Storck, an American expatriate, and Hans Arp. By the end of 1918, however, she was tumultuously in love with Rudolf Bauer. For the better part of her remaining life she was never totally free of his influence and never fully immune to his manipulation, greed, and egomania. Bauer, who found himself unendingly fascinating and his work beyond mortal comprehension and peer, demanded Rebay's financial assistance and spaniel-like love. She responded obediently by sharing money she received from her family. Rebay was fixated on Bauer and unfaltering in her belief in his greatness as an artsit. Though she was in love with him, she rejected his proposal of marriage:

> To be married—that would be ridiculous, stupid . . . . Ties are for me unbearable and completely impossible, I would be destroyed . . . . I could never get along with anyone forever.

As Rebay entered the fourth decade of her life, she continued to paint portraits and modernist works, and to grapple with her own being in ways that are not fully explored in Lukach's biography. She wrote Bauer in 1921:

> A woman of thirty without children has lived her life . . . . It is a weakness, a great weakness, that I need so much love. Nobody showed me any love, and that is why I am so pitifully grateful and forgiving when anyone shows me even the least consideration.

When Rebay moved to the United States in 1927, she settled in New York, which she found to be "a great wild city with myriad dimensions . . . a great place, the only one in which one is not hindered." Here, she attempted to live from the sale of collages but soon learned that "New York is terribly expensive . . . . I starve often enough and must work very hard when there is work. I thank God for the work when I get it, for there are 2000 artists here and many either starve or work in offices." She met other artists and earned some money from her work as a commercial artist and as a teacher (she briefly taught the young Louise Nevelson). Slowly, her circumstances improved and, in August of 1927, she moved from a one-room flat on Riverside Drive to a studio in Carnegie Hall.

For American buyers, Rebay's work was seen to be allied with the great European modernist movements, and fairly quickly her paintings were bought by important collectors, including, as she proudly wrote her parents, the Guggenheims. In fact, Rebay had arrived in America with a letter of introduction to Solomon Guggenheim, although she actually met him at a party in New York in 1927. "In less than a year," Lukach observes, "Rebay had become reasonably well established as an original talent who was also an acceptable dinner companion in the upper-class art-collecting society of New York." Solomon Guggenheim's wife Irene in particular befriended Rebay, bought her paintings, sought her advice on the works of other artists, and advised her on her career.

In 1928, after a visit to Europe, Rebay painted a full-length portrait of Solomon Guggenheim wearing plus fours and looking directly out from the canvas. The portrait is conservative, tight, stylized, even awkward, displaying no hint of Rebay's beloved modernist passions. Guggenheim was charmed by the artistic and vivacious young European noblewoman and encouraged Irene and Hilla to organize for the threesome a European tour, during which Hilla advised the Guggenheims on the purchase of new art.

By this time, Rebay had begun to use her Carnegie Hall studio as a place for the display of the advanced art of Europe. Over the years, guests there were introduced to new work and encouraged, in degrees of persuasion ranging from subtle innuendo to verbal bludgeoning, to collect modern art. Thus, Rebay took up the banner for a good cause. She was furthermore delighted by the inter-

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est she attracted to herself and to the art she passionately advocated. She was indeed "living exclusively for art."

The modern art Rebay devoted herself to was "non-objective," which she distinguished meticulously from "abstract." Abstract art, she argued, evinces natural or biomorphic suggestions, while non-objective works derive from or refer to no subject whatsoever. In an essay entitled "Definition of Non-Objective Painting," she wrote: "Because it is our destiny to be creative and our fate to become spiritual, humanity will come to develop and enjoy greater intuitive power through creations of great art, the glorious masterpieces of non-objectivity."

Rebay's greatest contribution to the cause of non-objective art, of course, was her influence on the Guggenheim collection. During the early years of building the collection, she often relied heavily on Rudolf Bauer's judgment and assistance in locating and purchasing works of art. For his part, he continued to receive money, now in the form of stipends from Solomon Guggenheim. Rebay persuaded Guggenheim of Bauer's genius and encouraged the inclusion of his work in the collection.

By 1930, Guggenheim had begun to dream, with Rebay, of the building of a "Temple of Non-Objectivity." Rebay, bedazzled by the dream, sought ideas and approval from artists, collectors, and dealers in the United States and Europe. Along the way, she became friendly with Moholy-Nagy, Mondrian, Léger, Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Kandinsky, and—even though his work did not meet the criteria of non-objectivism—Chagall.

Throughout the Depression, Rebay financially assisted many artists by purchasing their work or by giving them outright gifts. By 1937, when Solomon Guggenheim established the Guggenheim Foundation, he was as determined as Rebay to support artists, as well as to realize the "Temple of Non-Objective Art." According to Lukach, the Foundation provided Rebay with "around $2000 a year, which she divided among a great many artists in the form of funds for art supplies." Guggenheim, pleased with Rebay's performance as adviser and curator of the collection, which together they planned and exhibited, rewarded her well, enabling her to live easily and elegantly. Lukach notes that by 1938 "Hilla Rebay was no longer simply a charming artist who lived in a chic one-room studio, advising wealthy patrons about art. She had become a person of consequence, the curator of an important art collection, and the owner of a substantial suburban home."

By 1938, too, Rebay had become outspoken in her opposition to Hitler. She remarked to Bauer that "without Jews, culture would soon go to the devil" and to everyone who knew her she vociferously attacked German politics. Indeed, through careful and diplomatic manipulation Rebay saved from destruction a body of modern art that the Nazi government had labeled decadent. Ironically, her German origins and German ways made her suspect to Americans. During the Second World War, she was subjected to considerable bureaucratic harassment, including, at one point, being forbidden to leave Connecticut until she had cleared herself of charges of hoarding.

Rebay's interest, energy, good breeding, and spontaneous kindnesses made her an extraordinary companion, an unusually attractive woman. By this time in her life, however, she had made many enemies. Whatever her initial appeal, it was offset by her bad temper and saw-edged tongue, her overbearing opinions and black moods. As the years passed, her darker side overshadowed her devotion to art, her keen intelligence, her natural generosity. She became, in the eyes of many people in the art world, an eccentric pill. She squabbled and fussed, wrote abstruse and doctrinaire criticism about art-as-spirituality, and became increasingly strident in her insistence on the primacy of non-objective art. At the very least, Rebay built between herself and the world a wall of quirks and spikey responses. It is one of the faults of Lukach's biography that the

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good works and the woman remain mostly behind that wall.

After years of anxiety and fear for the future of the collection and for non-objective art itself, Rebay's physical and mental health began to decline, and Guggenheim noticed. When he learned early in 1949 that he had cancer, he added a letter to his will:

> As I have often said, "[Rebay] has put the Foundation on the map." It is therefore my wish that, in furthering the aims of the Foundation, she be provided with every possible help, and that her experience be availed of and her advice used even if she should not be able to do all the work she is now doing. It is also my hope that she will be provided with enough assistance to enable her to paint and to do other artistic work, in which she is so unusually gifted . . . .
>
> It is my further wish that during the lifetime of Miss Rebay the Foundation accept no gifts and make no purchases of paintings without her approval, and that after her death the Foundation make no addition to its collections of paintings, unless they come from Mr. Bauer.

After Guggenheim's death, however, the Foundation came under the influence of other members of his family. In 1952, Rebay "relinquished her position as director of The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, although she continued to serve as a trustee. Late that same year, James Johnson Sweeney, whom she had known since the early 1930s, was chosen as her successor." Nevertheless, Rebay played a crucial role in the designing of the museum building. She worked tirelessly with Frank Lloyd Wright to bring into existence a building she believed to be worthy of the Guggenheim collection and of the religion of non-objectivism. Even Wright, who possessed opinions as strong as Rebay's own, acknowledged her contributions to the design of the museum. Lukach reports:

> When the new building was completed in 1959 Rebay was disheartened and outraged, not by the building itself, which she had praised to Wright before his death, but by the museum's *Inaugural Exhibition,* which she had been anticipating for three decades. True, it included artists whose work she had collected: Albers, Bonnard, Calder, Chagall, Delaunay, Feiniger, Gleizes, Gris, Herbin Kandinsky, Klee, Léger, Marc, Metzinger, Modigliani, Moholy-Nagy, Mondrian, Nicholson, Pevsner, Picasso, Rousseau, Schwitters, Seurat, and Viera da Silva. Then there were artists whom she might have at least been interested in acquiring, but did not: Cézanne, Goncharova, Larinov, Malevich, and Vasarely. However, the rest were artists whose work she had known and rejected, or in which she could not have been at all interested, including Arp, Brancusi, Braque, Stuart Davis, Dubuffet, Ernst, Gottlieb, Kline, de Kooning, Lipchitz, Maillol, Miró, Pollock, Soulages, and Villon.

Moreover, Sweeney had arranged the works according to his sense of their dynamic interrelation, without slavish attention to chronology and its troubling suggestion of progression or destiny. In her own plans, Rebay would have installed the collection to reveal—if not preach—precisely that progression toward ultimate spirituality, toward purity and absolutism. Nonetheless, she stood honored by the selection of works: her great contribution to the museum's permanent collection was made generously apparent by Sweeney.

Thereafter, Rebay travelled, collected art for herself, lectured, and supported artists whose views she found sympathetic. But she was far from happy. In her last years, she increasingly felt herself abandoned and betrayed on all fronts, her influence obliterated. And she felt old and alone. (Bauer had died in 1953.) She began to consider ways in which she could ensure for posterity her beliefs and achievements. She turned naturally to her collection and to thoughts of establishing her own museum at her home in Connecticut. Five years before her death, she began to plan the Hilla von Rebay Foundation, which was to "foster, promote, and encourage the interest of the public in non-objective art."

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By the time Rebay died, she was an acknowledged "eye" in the recognition of non-objective art, but in almost all else she was regarded as a spoiled and arrogant screwball. It was said that she had been first Solomon Guggenheim's mistress and only second his adviser in collecting art. In Lukach's summing up, she addresses this last speculation with characteristic judiciousness and circumspection:

> Hilla Rebay, with all her shortcomings, was devoted to human artistic expression. She had a positive outlook and a firm belief in the improving powers of art. She dedicated her life and her considerable energy to caring not only for the art objects she collected, but for many of the artists as well. Like any evangelist she was determined that others—many others—should come to share her dedication. Her conviction could be contagious, and among her converts to the cause of non-objective art was her patron, Solomon Guggenheim. What began for the nearly retired multimillionaire as an intriguing diversion became the avocation of his last years. Was it a love affair? Many wish to know. There are no documents to suggest that it was . . . . Whatever the secret depth of their affection might have been, if it was expressed on paper, such letters have not been discovered. Their relationship may be considered a love affair of a different sort, an unlikely union between two very different characters who had in common their genuine devotion to the art in the collection they created together, which produced for posterity an outstanding and flourishing museum.

Like this passage, Lukach's book is fairly if not vibrantly written, and it is appreciative without searching out hidden truths. It is a solid piece of work that puts in view some of the players and some of the issues of our century, but in the end Hilla Rebay's cloister remains unstormed and her essence—made manifest in her drives and energies, her self-centeredness, her passion for absolutes, her destructive love—is glimpsed only fleetingly rather than grasped.

A critic without a country

Alfred Kazin An American Procession. Knopf, 407 pages, $18.95

reviewed by Lionel Abel

Alfred Kazin is a literary critic with craft and style, an artist at his chosen trade. Even the slighter pieces he brings off—occasional reviews for *The New Republic* or *The New York Review of Books*—are often blessed with a prose which can mix something of the energy in the work considered with that in the critic's consideration of it. And two of the essays in Kazin's *Contemporaries*—the ones on *Moby Dick* and *Light in August,* which are masterpieces of inquiring, yet impassioned approval—are among the best pieces of American criticism.

Is Kazin, then, a great critic? This is quite another matter. I'm told that some years ago, when Kazin was visiting Edmund Wilson, the latter, feeling suddenly ill (he had been thinking of death, as men his age often do), said to Kazin before going up to bed, "If I don't come down in the morning for breakfast—something untoward may happen—promise me that you'll take up my torch." The next morning Wilson, feeling better, came down to breakfast with Kazin, and, when asking the latter to pass him the butter, added, "and with it, please hand me back my torch."

Now Wilson *was* a great critic. If not for the depth or originality of his ideas, then for the devotion and care with which he examined literary works not only of this country and our time, but of so many other countries, so many other times, and always in the particular language of the writer considered. He was great, I should say, for these reasons, and for the polished artistry of his prose style. Then was he not right to think of passing the torch to Alfred Kazin, whom I also call an artist in criticism?

I once defended Edmund Wilson against Richard Gilman's remark that as a critic

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Wilson had been overrated. Recently running into Gilman, I admitted to him that my praise of Wilson had been somewhat overdone. For in praising Wilson I neglected to note that, for all the soundness and bravura of his critical writings, he was still open to the charge made by Nabokov against literary critics who stress social context, as Wilson did (and as Kazin does): that they are unable to read books "with their backs," that is, with their whole being. Certainly Nabokov's essays on Joyce and Flaubert are immensely superior to Wilson's. No, Wilson was not able to read books "with his back," but he was a great critic all the same, great for his art and for his scope. Now Kazin has something of the first, but very little of the second.

Then is Kazin a great critic? Here I would like to change the question somewhat and ask instead this one: Does Kazin ever think of himself as a great critic? Now to just ask this question directly as I have done is to see at once that it is unmannerly and designed to give pain. I have dared to raise it because it is just this kind of question which Kazin has put to Henry Adams, to Henry James, to Emerson, and to Pound in his consideration of these writers in *An American Procession.*

Denis Donoghue, in *The New York Review of Books* of July 1984, refers to "the withholding quality of *An American Procession.*" He notes that Kazin first sketches out a "myth of endless grandeur" about American literature, and then grudgingly concedes the benefit of the myth to a few writers, while "some, notably Pound, are driven out of it. Pound's *Cantos* are dismissed as a diary of a man drunk in many languages." I submit that the term *withholding* hardly conveys what in explanation of the term Mr. Donoghue describes. Grudgingly admitting a few writers to the benefits of a myth and dismissing others from it, and doing this with a damned-if-I-care-how-anyone-feels-about-it frankness—this is something quite different from real candor—and it is considerably more offensive than just withholding from certain writers the honor of the legendary.

In fact, Kazin has chosen to pick quarrels with and *épater* most of the writers in his great procession. A century ago it was thought that writers and artists, for their part, should *épater* the bourgeoisie. To be sure, for a long time now your good bourgeois has enjoyed nothing so much as being *épatéed.* What remains for someone who longs for the thrill of such radical name-calling? But I think something else motivates Kazin's book besides the desire for thrills. In his first book of criticism, *On Native Grounds,* which appeared in 1942, Alfred Kazin, commenting on Van Wyck Brooks's *The Life of Emerson,* wrote: "After almost twenty-five years of quarreling with the national character, Brooks suddenly fell in love with it." One can say that the very opposite has happened to Alfred Kazin. After twenty-five years of loving the American national character, Alfred Kazin has decided to quarrel with it, and with those who represent it in our literature, to tweak their imagined noses and pull their remembered beards. For he is no longer in love with the country whose coming to consciousness they represented for him in his first book. In a review of Jacques Barzun's *A Stroll with William James* in *The New York Review of Books,* Kazin told us that a stroll with the philosopher is most welcome as a stroll out of "the hateful 1960's and 1970's and 1980's," and in a piece on Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's biography of Hannah Arendt in the same journal, Kazin called attention to "the astonishing degradation of America in recent years." This is the country, he told us still more recently, whose congress would not pass the Bill of Rights were it submitted for passage today. What can he do, with right-wingers in power, and the extreme Left, as he says, sunk in "idiocy," but *épater* our great writers, and *épater* them most particularly insofar as they themselves did not *épater* their bourgeoisie?

Kazin holds against Emerson his saying that "Life consists of what a man is thinking of all day." Kazin replies: "Melville's Ishmael, who did a lot of thinking at sea, snapped back in the opening of *Moby-Dick*: 'Who ain't a slave? Tell me that.'" Now this

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is no answer to what Emerson liked to say. For my part, I very much like what he liked saying. For life *does* consist of what one is thinking of all day, even if one is a slave. Thinking here means, I assume, wishing, dreaming, desiring, for that is what Descartes meant when he called the mind a "thinking substance." Also against Emerson (to Kazin) is the fact that he communicated with and admired the reactionary Carlyle, who admired him. Emerson, says Kazin, was "altogether too acceptable a sage." Why didn't he try to make himself more disliked? And he was more concerned, it appears, with "the ordinariness of American life, than with slavery." Now Kazin might have mentioned that Emerson contributed one thousand dollars to John Brown when the latter took Harper's Ferry, yet did not feel it was his main task in life to be an agitator. Emerson's quite special talents were of course much more related to making Americans aware of the limitations to which they had become accustomed than to driving them to desperate actions. Quoting the following lines of a poem of Emerson's—

> Know the stars yonder,
> The stars everlasting,
> Are fugitive also . . . .

—Kazin notes that "William Butler Yeats thought these the most beautiful lines he had ever read," and then comments: "Yeats improved them by recalling them as 'the stars, the stars everlasting/are fugitive also.'" I do not myself find Yeats's addition an improvement.

Writing on Henry James in *On Native Grounds,* Kazin actually transformed some of the limitations of the novelist into positive traits. He wrote:

> It was astonishing how James's penetration had fastened itself to a hundred different subjects, themes, qualities, events, which by the conventional assessments of James's talent were presumably closed to it, but which, by the slow and avid pressure of his perception,

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> he conveyed with devastating lucidity. . . . He had no politics, no experience (almost, one would say, no comprehension) of poverty and the poor, no sympathy with social revolution; but he was the only American novelist of his time who, illuminating almost by an artist's instinct what the conscious citizen's mind would never understand, invested the whole atmosphere of revolution and conspiracy in *The Princess Casamassima* with an imperishable significance.

This was finely said. But now take note of how in *An American Procession* Kazin makes the very opposite point, transforming what may well be taken as James's virtues as an artist into the moral shortcomings both of the artist and the man. In his new book Kazin, having placed *The Golden Bowl* among James's finest works, comments on it thus:

> Nowhere else in James are such greedy and crooked people so constantly ennobled in conversation with people who are distrustful and distrusted but regularly come out with "You're wonderful"—because of a social status that on all sides compels respect, *especially from Henry James.* [My italics.]

Kazin believes that Ezra Pound was avid for power, and this explains his support of the Axis in the Second World War. Now I have no impulse to defend Pound's politics, and when I read Hugh Kenner's very fine book, *The Pound Era* (on which Kazin has had to rely in his own reading of the *Cantos*), I wrote Kenner that I could not accept his explanation of Pound's anti-semitism. On the other hand, the *Cantos* are not rightly characterized by Mr. Kazin when he terms them "obscene," nor was Pound in any sense a power-monger. Kazin writes:

> Pound was the last to believe that the poet does have authority. His manic power reminds us why Plato feared the poets and wanted them out of the perfect Republic.

Now I am aware of the harm Pound did himself, but not of any real harm he did to this republic, which, by the way, is far from perfect. And people who have known Pound say that he was of a sweet disposition, and personally inclined to be charitable. E. E. Cummings told me that he himself treated Pound, whom he liked, not as a dictator or warlord, but as a sweet and wonderfully bright, if disorderly, child. When Pound came to Patchen Place to visit Cummings just before the Second World War, and immediately began ranting against the Jews, Cummings, looking at his watch, announced, "My very dear friend Paul Rosenfeld will be here in just a few minutes. So you'll have to drop this stuff about the Jews . . . . However, I'll let you say something against *The New Republic,* which I know you dislike." Cummings was no Plato (in fact he disliked Plato and Platonism) but he knew how to handle Ezra Pound.

Of Pound's *Cantos* Kazin writes:

> If an epic "is a poem including history," we had better remember that as we drift through the *Cantos.* History turns out to be anything that interests Ezra Pound . . . . But this total recall and assemblage is the reverse of arbitrary; it is as natural to Pound as eating drinking copulating defecating, and it slides onto a page as if he were doing just that.

I submit that even with Hugh Kenner's help Kazin does not know how to read Pound's *Cantos.* It seems to me that it is not enough for a literary critic to hand out a few conventional compliments, interspersed with political insults, and claim to have judged the writer he is examining. Kazin's claim is that Pound made a maniacal bid for power on the basis of a very elitist knowledge of the craft of verse. Now in fact Pound's notions about poetry had nothing to do with his notions about power. He thought poetry was not at all the best way of saying something *poetic,* that it was in fact the best way of saying *anything whatever,* and that thus really good poems were an index to the quality of a culture, and hence, an index to history. It is, I think, perfectly valid for a poet to

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approach history through what he knows best, the art of poetry, and if Pound made political errors because of this belief, think of the equally monstrous errors made by men from the more sober view that history reflects economic interests.

In his judgments of Henry Adams and of T. S. Eliot, Alfred Kazin is less concerned to mock the achievements of these writers, which he of course recognizes, than to challenge their moral worth, discovering weaknesses of character and mistakes of political judgment. Thus he sees in Eliot a "longing for authority, a contempt for democracy." He writes: "What Eliot could never admit about his own unhappiness in his many self-accusations in London, even when he was lecturing to workers' classes, was his lack of sympathy for the masses." Now the masses are the mob, and the mob, Kierkegaard told us, is the lie. And for this Shakespeare had as little sympathy as did T. S. Eliot. How much does Alfred Kazin have, who has complained about the precipitous rush of our century into mass society? And of Henry Adams Kazin writes: "he was a man so totally acid, embittered, enraged, that his dislike of the contemporary world had become a kind of ecstasy." Elsewhere, he describes Adams as malicious, snobbish, elitist, and much too concerned in his period about the "degradation of democratic dogma," something for which Kazin wants approval for being concerned about today. But what especially marks Kazin's peculiar approach to these two writers is not his literary praise or moral blame of them but his tendency to subject both the writers and their works to his varying and moody evaluations of them. Even when their works are praised, the writers are never prized. Now this was never true of Edmund Wilson's criticism; he always brought his readers fully into his great acts of prizing the writers he admired.

Kazin notes that Eliot admitted to Bertrand Russell that only part of *The Waste Land,* "What the Thunder Said," was for him really successful. Kazin does not say he agrees or disagrees with this judgment. He simply sets it down for its value as gossip, which I think is all it is worth, and is by no means to be taken as the poet's real judgment of the poem, or even as a clue as to what our judgment of it should be. Kazin also quotes Eliot as having "ruefully admitted" in later years that *The Waste Land* was to him "only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling." Once again Kazin is quoting Eliot against himself. And even when he judges the poem to be more than Eliot's remark makes of it he does this in such a way as to adjust the additional merit of the poem to a continuing question about the character of its author. Still on *The Waste Land,* Kazin writes: "It was vibrantly so much more [than a grouse] that the relaxed and mellow Eliot of the mid century . . . . now shielded by his immense fame and happy second marriage, understandably had no desire to descend from the delectable mountain he had finally reached." What was wrong with his having wanted to stay on that mountain, seeing it was so delectable? "[I]t was perhaps only the more conservative Americans . . . who could live out their lives in England. Even in his twenties, Thomas Stearns Eliot was definitely conservative . . . . [N]eeding God, he settled for authority. 'Authority' was what Europe alone could supply—in the form of culture." But how does Alfred Kazin know that Eliot, needing God, settled for authority? When Kazin ended his autobiographical memoir *New York Jew* with the cry "I want my God again!" didn't he really mean it was his God he wanted? And even if he thinks that Eliot did not find *his* God, it is simply unmannerly to insist that he accepted some ersatz for it. Many years ago, Harold Rosenberg published a poem I always liked entitled "Prayer for a Prayer." He never republished it, for, as he told me, he thought it expressed T. S. Eliot's attitude, which can be summed up in that poem's title. His poetry, all of it, may be called a prayer for a prayer, which is not the same as a prayer for culture or for cultural authority.

Here is Kazin on Henry Adams: The author of *The Education,* he writes, "despised

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the masses, despaired of progress, declared himself a failure, and drew the last drop of bitterness from his experience . . . . How crafty Adams is . . . in editing the facts of his life! How much he leaves out, how much he glosses over! . . . He seeks to create impressions, to prove a case by so thoroughly being one. Everything in the life of this man, his country, his ancestors, his generation, and his particular subject—the predicament of the human mind trying to calculate, but constantly being outdone by, the mighty new forces it has raised up—finally arranges itself as a pattern to produce a particular effect. Modern society is flying apart through its own madly self-multiplying energies." Isn't there a vast amount of truth in this judgment? But Kazin does not pause to note that there is, moreover that he is largely in agreement with it. He goes on to find an insignificant and discreditable motive for Adams having written as he did: "A world is going to hell in explanation of the worldly 'failure' of this prophetic nature, Henry Adams." Kazin does not seem to realize that one has no right to psychologize the reasons for a judgment which strikes one as true.

Of course, the assessment of all these writers is tied up with their being Americans. The phrases "only an American could have" and its corollary "no European could have" are repeated so many times in Kazin's pages that they become leading motifs for the whole work. Also they introduce judgments that are either trivial or false. It is simply not true that "only an American" could see past literature as a completed whole. Hegel thought of it in exactly that way, and his consideration of literature was not ignored by Eliot. And I do not know why Eliot's sense of the past should be called a "paean" to it. And Kazin is quite wrong when he writes ". . . it was an American who was to ask 'Was Europe a success?'" Kazin's assumption, of course, is that only an American would ask that question forthrightly. "A European naturally would be more diffident." But Paul Valéry was not diffident when he asked that very question about Europe in the first volume of *Variety,* and I myself heard Ortega y Gasset ask and answer it forthrightly in Geneva in 1951. Of Adams's sense of history, Kazin writes, "The subject was overwhelming—history rushing to its end . . . the egotism of this is monumental, historic, creative. Only an American could have felt it." But this was experienced by Hegel, when he envisaged Napoleon at Jena as the world-spirit on horseback; this has long been a platitude of the Marxist school and in the consciousness of every cultivated European. When Ortega y Gasset in 1951 announced "Europe is dead," Jean Wahl whispered to me, "I knew that thirty years ago."

Heidegger has told us that prizing, of which there is so little in *An American Procession,* is the objective side of criticism. Reading this book of Kazin's I'm inclined to Heidegger's opinion for I have been constantly struck by the extreme subjectivism of Kazin's appraisal. When he writes on Henry Adams, for instance, one never knows whether he is judging the *Education* or its author. Adams's experience, he tells us, is characteristically American, yet the *Education*—he insists on this—is a very English book. And he is as subjective on James. He wonders at the novelist's not having noticed the American state, which had just put down a massive rebellion, but a hundred years after our Civil War, an Israeli intellectual, Avineri, visiting this country for a conference on Hegel, noted that the American youth he spoke to seemed completely unaware of the American state, and cited Hegel's remark that America could not have a real state as long as it still had a frontier. Kazin refers to Karl Marx as "that powerful man of letters." One may call Marx a prophet, an economist, a historian, a philosopher, but hardly, except by one's momentary inclination toward the predicate, as a "man of letters." Rosa Luxemburg, who certainly admired Marx, found the literary style of *Das Kapital* insupportably "rococo."

I began by saying that Mr. Kazin brings a certain artistry to criticism, and I must note

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here that he thinks himself an artist. He told me once that his autobiographical work *Walker in the City* is not unlike Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* Well, I concede Kazin's artistry. But that leaves to be determined the kind of artist he is.

Some years ago I heard the French mime De Croux lecture here in New York, and he startled me by saying that for a certain kind of artist the most important thing is the fatherland. He quickly added that the fatherland for Jean Racine had been the Roman Empire, and for other artists a utopia of some sort. But now the idea that for certain artists the fatherland comes before all else does throw a definite light on the otherwise rather bewildering performance of Alfred Kazin in *An American Procession.* When he wrote *On Native Grounds,* his hero was not any single American writer whose work had excited him, but the emerging sense of national identity which the talent of our American writers heralded. The final chapter of *On Native Grounds* is entitled "America! America!" and leads off with the following quote from Abigail Adams: "Do you know that European birds have not half the melody of ours?" Alas, poor Alfred! He loved America when he wrote his first book of criticism. He can barely—as he made clear in his *New York Review of Books* pieces—endure this country today.

So he has turned against the country's greatest writers. He does not totally reject them of course, but he feels he has to show disdain for them. If they were quite worthless, there would be no point in the ritual. But since they are not worthless, he has to dwell on their faults, and invent some where none are to be found. There is a certain warmth of tone in his text whenever he mentions the name of a European writer. I was struck by sudden warmth—as though a beam of sunlight had hit the page—when I came on the name Balzac. But it is not that Mr. Kazin now honors the European writers more, I think it is that he honors the American writers less. Yet it is the American writers who have been the chosen subjects of his whole career as a critic. James Joyce did choose exile, but he was not the kind of artist for whom the main thing could be his fatherland. St. John Perse, in exile, wrote: "I shall inhabit my name." But now Alfred Kazin is a very special kind of artist, one who chose the literature of the land he has lived in to write about. Is he to be a critic without a country?

Photography and art

Jonathan Green American Photography: A Critical History 1945 to the Present. Abrams, 248 pages, $35.

reviewed by Jed Perl

In *American Photography,* Jonathan Green has set out to describe what has happened in the last half-century among photographers and the publications and institutions with which they are involved. This first general account of the period is much more substantial than its showy, chaotic layout might suggest. Green has, I think, gotten the emphasis right: if the photographers he talks about seem at times overshadowed by all the other things—the magazines, museums, and ideas—this is probably a fair picture of a period during which photography has been accepted, generally, as creative art, though photographers have not created all that much of major consequence.

The chapters of *American Photography* move rather quickly. One passes through the "Family of Man" show, Minor White and *Aperture,* Robert Frank and the Beats, MOMA's photography department under John Szarkowski, photo-journalism of the 1960s. It amounts to a series of flash cards from recent history. The approach, though, is never trivializing, and when Green moves in on a photographer his descriptions are sometimes quite apt. Here is Green on the subjects of Harry Callahan's photographs.

> It is the common world of warm and cool mornings, of the park, of overcast afternoons at the seashore, of sunlit rooms in summer

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> cottages, of dense thickets and grasses, of the sudden shafts of light within the canyoned city, of the blankness and isolation on the faces of passing strangers, of the city's splendid as well as terrifying visages and facades.

This is on the mark, but it also illustrates some of the weaknesses of Green's prose. Though the parts of the sentence are good, the sentence goes on too long and lacks a convincing rhythm. The next two lines are also not bad, the first better than the second. "Like home snapshots, Callahan's photographs have about them the sustained inevitability of remembered experience. [This would be better without "sustained."] Memory acts as a filter that obscures the unimportant and highlights the essential." The next sentence begins, "Cultural anthropologists tell us . . ."—pulling one off abruptly in another direction. As writing, *American Photography* is a book without a style. Green lacks a feeling for the paragraph; he is unable to bring his sentences together into larger units. At times the prose doesn't seem to be going anywhere, and even when one feels the author's enthusiasms pushing things along, as in the chapters on Robert Frank and Minor White, the ideas do not expand to find an appropriate shape.

Green's first chapter, "Photography and the American Imagination," reaches back into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to construct a basic aesthetic of American photography. Green identifies four themes "that penetrate most directly to the essentials of the American imagination: the notion of Democracy; the idea of the Frontier; the Puritan heritage; and the demands of Utilitarianism." This seems reasonable enough, and goes a way toward defining American photography as distinct from European photography. European artists more often than American artists treasure old things, the hidden, telling moment, and what might be called a felicity of form.

With his definition of American-ness in hand, Green in this first chapter examines very briefly the work of seven photographers, from O'Sullivan and Stieglitz to Walker Evans and Ansel Adams. The result is a rather rushed survey, more interesting for the methodology that Green espouses than for any specific insights into the photographers. "In this book," Green explains, "I have chosen to deal for the most part with the history the photographs themselves have made, not with the history or biographies of the photographers." This doesn't really strike me as what the book—with its emphasis on exhibitions, publications, and "movements"—sets out to do; it is, though, quite revealing of Green's basic attitude toward photography. Green is suggesting that photographs are self-contained enough—that enough meaning inheres in them in and of themselves—to make it possible to write photographic history in the same way that one can write literary and art history: from the works out, with the social world inferred from the world that the artists have made.

For Green, photography is a medium of almost limitless possibilities. The photographers in *American Photography* are not, except perhaps for some of the journalists and fashion people, really working for anybody: they are making of photography what they please, and in their hands photography is susceptible to every sort of influence. Political ideas, philosophy, poets, painting styles: all of these act on the photographer and help the photographer form a personal vision. There is a giddy diversity about the photography scene as represented in *American Photography*. Green is by no means unaware of the unique relation that photographers have with reality, yet reality places no real constraints on these photographers. A photographer's work can be straight, documentary, socially conscious, hip, experimental, high-fashion, or high-art. Reading *American Photography* one gets the feeling that the photographer is god-like, omnipotent in relation to reality: he can do anything with it. After Green has set aside the popularism of Steichen's "Family of Man" show in Chapter Two, the book reads like a celebration of aesthetic freedom.

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What disturbs me in this book is something that has always bothered me about contemporary photography. I find it hard to know what arena the photographers believe themselves to be operating within. Do they think what they are doing is art, entertainment, or some hybrid form? Often, the photographers seem to think of what they do as a sort of popular art. The banality of suburbia, the wonderful oddities and spectacles of the world, the sloth, waste, and weirdness of modern life are laid out as a kind of dramatic atmosphere for one to soak up. One is being asked to marvel, gasp, or get involved in some sort of action to change the way things are. Many of the most effective groups of recent photographs were designed to make picture story books. Robert Frank's *The Americans* and William Klein's books on cities (Tokyo, New York, Rome, Moscow) lay out the physiognomy of places and entertain and enthrall one in the way certain kinds of movies do. Photographers keep exclaiming, "Wow, isn't that stuff out there wild!" or sending messages about the state of the world. But then they hang their photographs on the walls of galleries and ask the audience to judge them as self-contained, set-off-from-the-world. The showmen become modernists.

Green believes that photography is a form of modernist art. It would be difficult to write a history of contemporary photography if one thought otherwise, since for years it has been accepted wisdom that photography is hand in glove with modernism. This idea is codified at the Museum of Modern Art, where, in general, the earliest works in the collections date from the Post-Impressionists of the 1880s, while the photography collection contains works dating more than a half-century earlier. The position of the Museum of Modern Art seems to be that all photography, as a central element of modern visual sensibility, is a priori modern art. (Even if you date modernism from Manet, photography began more than three decades earlier.) The telling and, to my mind, mistaken assumption here is that the modern sensibility and modernist art are one and the same thing. This idea goes so deep with Green that it hardly ever surfaces. I do, though, in this connection, find a very significant omission in Green's discussion of Susan Sontag and the photographic criticism of the 1970s. Green mentions as influences on Sontag Marx, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and John Berger—but omits Baudelaire. Baudelaire, perhaps the greatest of all writers on both photography and the idea of modern art, is a prime influence on Sontag's thinking, as he was on Benjamin's. Baudelaire, who was fascinated by photography even as he was obsessed by the dream of a new kind of art, addressed himself directly to the relation of photography and modernity: he found them profoundly antipathetic. According to Baudelaire, photography was the slave of a limited kind of veracity, it clung to the appearances of things, while painting, guided by the imagination (which Baudelaire called "The Queen of the Faculties") could use nature as a dictionary, to be played with, arranged at will.

Green, like many of the photographers he describes, assumes that photography and modernism are completely reconcilable. In order to believe this, one must, I think, downplay the extent to which modernism represents a revolt against mimesis. Man Ray and Harry Callahan apply modernist ideas as a kind of electric shock treatment to photographic reality, with results that are often quite beautiful. Robert Heinecken and Ray Metzker, two prominent recent photographers, do not know how radical the abstract ideas they mix into their collage photographs originally were. Heinecken and Metzker do not understand that there is a photographic reality, a Cubist reality, a Mondrianist reality, each with its own particular qualities and characteristics. For Heinecken and Metzker abstraction represents freedom without responsibility. These photographers lack aesthetic judgment, they lack taste.

In Green's *American Photography* several picture layouts juxtapose paintings and pho-

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tographs so one can see the similarities. (On the title page it is explained that the pictures were "selected and sequenced" by Green and a colleague of his at Ohio State University, James Friedman. I think we can take these layouts as a part of the thesis of the book.) This technique of juxtaposition is by now standard in photography. It has become almost a reflex to put a Courbet next to a Gustave Le Gray, something Cubist next to a Paul Strand abstraction. In one case in *American Photography,* at the beginning of the chapter on the color photography of the 1970s, Green's use of juxtaposition gets quite elaborate. Opposite the opening page of this chapter are reproduced together a photograph by Joel Meyerowitz and paintings by Thomas Cole and Jules Olitski. Green begins the chapter with John I. H. Baur's description of nineteenth-century American luminist painting. He then observes that

> it is exactly [Baur's] concern for "meticulous realism," "atmospheric effects," and "precise rendering" of color that sustains the sensibility and animates the palettes of the straight color photographers of the seventies . . . .
>
> The straight color photography of the seventies brings together major traditions in American photography and painting. It combines aspects of classic view photography, small-camera street photography, snapshot photography, mid-nineteenth-century landscape painting, and twentieth-century color-field painting. The new color photography has deep ties to those moments in the history of American visual expression when various permutations of realism, idealism, color harmony, and luminosity combined.

After reading this, one feels a need to go back to the page of illustrations and see how it adds up. The largest illustration, at the top of the page, is the Meyerowitz. Here is the porch of a white-painted wooden beach house. At left through an open door one gets a peek of an interior bathed in orange light; beyond the porch are sea and sky of an intense, almost lurid blue; all the way to the right, against the blue, runs a bolt of white (lightning, I suppose, though it looks rather artificial). Below the Meyerowitz, reproduced much smaller, are the two paintings, each of which is, in actuality, more than twenty-five times the size of the photograph. On the left is a scene from Thomas Cole's *Voyage of Life* series (1840). On a dark sea an old man sits in his small boat, piously regarding a white angel who points him toward the heavenly white light that breaks through the dark sky above. On the right is the Jules Olitski, *Pink Shush* (1965), reproduced so small that one can't see much, except that an overall crimson-pink fades into oranges and brick-reds. One gets, vaguely, the point: the Meyerowitz, *Porch, Provincetown* (1977), has keyed-up yet velvety color like the Olitski, and a mystical sense of sea and sky—of nature's moods—like the Cole. Green speaks of "major traditions" as if they were all equal, mixable, alike; actually, if one looks at the plate page, the two paintings on the bottom look like a little pedestal of justification supporting the photograph above.

For Green, putting a photograph next to a painting is probably not much different than putting a painting next to a painting: a matter of declaring origins, connections, "traditions." When Green speaks of photographers as having a "palette" or doing "precise rendering," he makes the same error as the critic who spoke of the photographer's draftsmanship (I believe Ben Lifson, in the *Village Voice*), or of the "Before Photography" show at MOMA, which sought to prove that photography was the legitimate child of painting. Green thinks that tradition inheres in a limited group of formal characteristics and forgets that the painting or photograph is a *made thing.* Photography is not painting by other means: it is distinct, and though it can use painting ideas, it cannot enter into painting tradition. Painting history is, in some deep way, a history of manual labor. Paintings are made inch by inch, as the hand and arm work in mysterious relation with the heart and mind. The

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history of painting is more than seventeen thousand years old, and painting's power to express the ideas and ideals of states as well as of individuals is proven through time. When modern painting glories in its own obscurantism one knows that it has earned the right to mumble its message after centuries of serving religion and state. When photography becomes obscure—"modernist"—the images tend to give the effect of something forced. Photography has nothing to fall back on, which is why, I think, bad photography is often far more depressing than bad painting. When paintings fail they fail in relation to a tradition: the standard remains intact. When photographs fail there is nothing left.

Green would like to convey the feeling that photography in America is in good shape, building on its past. It would probably be closer to the truth to say that photography is in the worst shape it has ever been in. Almost since its beginnings, photography in America has been losing ground. In the first years —say up to 1860 or 1865—photographers expended tremendous effort on the most basic work of getting the images fixed on light-sensitized metal, paper, and glass. The photographers were almost making up the technique as they went along, and it may be that in those days the photographer was more an inventor in the sense that a painter is than he ever was to be again. What one feels from the best of the early photographs —what gives the images their excitement and richness—is the sense that nothing is assumed, that everything is up for grabs. There is no past to fall back on. With the standardization of photographic technique somewhere around the time of the Civil War photography began to be less personal. By the 1880s photographs in general looked dull and all the same. Certain photographers, by the force of their personalities, were able to keep the medium vital, but the central thrust of photography since the 1880s has been toward a democratization of photographic technology, so that photography has become available to everyone, and everyone has become a photographer. It is hard to imagine photography anymore as a passionately held vocation.

The journalists are among the few photographers who can still work and make a living full time without any presumptions to making art. Green illustrates in his chapter "Straight Shooting in the Sixties" a number of news photographs of the time—from Kent State, Vietnam, of Oswald—and comments on the great impact they had on people then. What meaning these photographs have lies in their actuality, in their witness to events. Green explains how these photographs differ from those of Garry Winogrand. Winogrand's photographs are "art," which brings one to Green's idea of what art is. "Winogrand," Green explains, "kept this brand of photojournalism on the level of art by building in a complexity that insured uncertainty. He used a baffling array of forms, suppressing content to the point where it became ambiguous, tentative, plural." Art, here, is based on obfuscation: art is something you can't get your hands on—a feeling of uncertainty.

At the center of photography there ought always to be something stripped-down, ascetic. This is a rigorous discipline: hard to contemplate—and even harder to live by—during these, photography's glamour years. Has simply taking photographs become so terrifyingly banal that it must be fancied up? The study of photography, having in recent years awoken from the slumber of unjust neglect, might just self-destruct now in an orgy of at last unrepressed egomania. Green is not the only one who threatens to sink photography under an excess baggage of meanings. *The Art of French Calotype,* by André Jammes and Eugenia Parry Janis, one of the most celebrated of recent studies of photographic history, runs along similar lines. Of a photograph of *Windmills of Montmartre* (1847-50) by Hippolyte Bayard, Jammes and Janis say that "a long exposure in the wind has left the spinning arm of the two mills almost invisible, seeming to have been devoured by the sky's caustic white light." Jammes and Janis call the windmills

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in the Bayard photograph "windmill phantoms," and conclude their discussion by remarking that "they reflect a world portrayed, as Eugène Fromentin observed about Rembrandt, 'in defiance of all likelihood.'" I like French calotypes very much, but how on earth can anyone speak of them in the same breath as Rembrandt?

The dustjacket and title page of *American Photography* are from a photograph by James Friedman, Green's collaborator. Friedman's photograph shows a light table (used for viewing slides) on which are scattered slides of images that appear in the book: a picture of pictures of pictures. The moral of this cover seems to be that nothing is enough in itself: everything must be complicated. Too much of what Green has to show is trick stuff: elaborate printing techniques, serial imagery, montage. Green's book describes a succession of theories, laced around the images. They range from the mysticism of Minor White to Winogrand's cult of camera vision. Winogrand says that "I photograph things in order to see what they look like photographed." This statement will no more account for our experience of a photograph than the conviction that analytical Cubist paintings are about perception will explain a Cubist painting.

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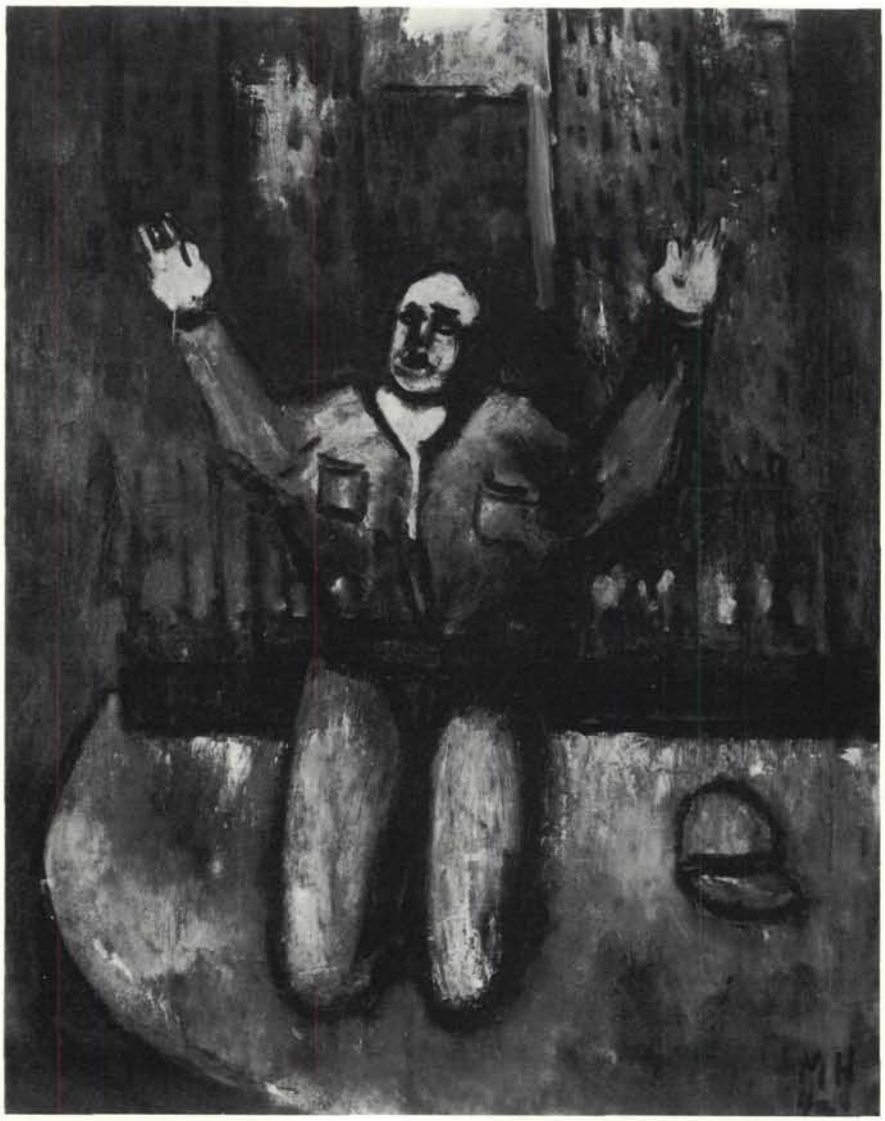

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Richard Benson, *Brooklyn Bridge, 1981*, platinum/palladium print, 10¼" x 17", Ed. 20 Collection Museum of Modern Art, NY

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